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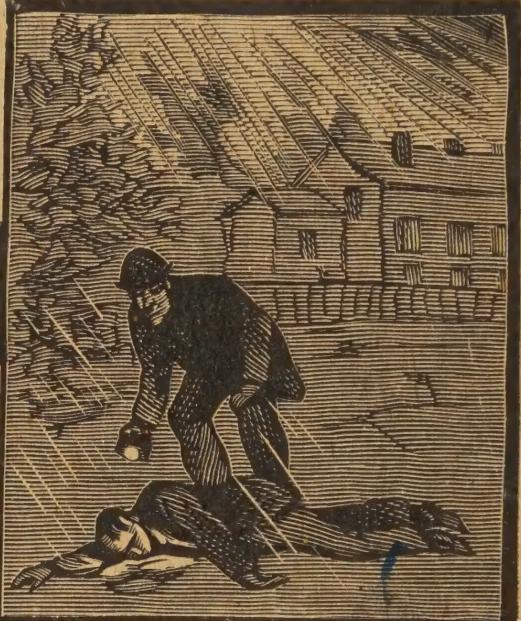
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THE Missing HEAD Mystery —OR— GIDEON GAULT on the ANDREW MOFFAT case BY LIEUT. CARLTON



Had Bill not been on his guard the bullet must have perforated his skull.

The Missing Head Mystery;

OR,

GIDEON GAULT ON THE ANDREW MOFFAT CASE

By LIEUTENANT CARLTON

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CHAPTER I.

A FEARFUL CRIME.

THE night was as black as the inside of a pocket, so to speak.

Neither moon nor star was out.

Great rolls of dun-colored clouds covered the entire sky. Yet there was not as much as a puff of air to rustle the leaves of the trees, which fact, if anything, was ominous of a rapid change from calm to storm.

The scene was dreary and solemn in the extreme, especially on such a night and at such an hour.

It was about twenty minutes past eleven o'clock, or within a few seconds of it.

The good people of the little town of Moffatsville had retired for the night.

Not a light was to be seen in any of the windows of the houses, nor could a sound be heard save the hoarse baying of a dog from some distant farmyard.

At this juncture a dark figure came out from some bushes about a quarter of a mile from Moffatsville, and getting into the road, listened intently.

Not a sound save the baying of the dog, and that came startling on the moveless air.

And then the man—for so the figure proved to be—took from one of his pockets a cigar and, striking a match on the sole of one of his boots, lighted it.

In the sudden glare of the little wood sliver it could be seen that this man was quite young, well, if slightly built, and decidedly good looking.

He could not have been more than twenty or twenty-two years of age.

His clothes were of fashionable cut and costly material. He glanced up at the sky.

The darkness of the vault above seemed to please him.

Then he looked back to the town of Moffatsville.

Even the hoarse baying of the farm dog had ceased.

"Not a solitary light in the whole town," said he, communing with himself.

"They're a straight-laced set, those Moffatsville people; and maybe it's as well that they are, for it's not likely we'll meet any interference with a project we have been thinking of for the past two months.

"But I should like to know what's keeping Tom Endicott?" he pursued.

"He was to have met me at a quarter past eleven sharp; now it's near half past.

"I hope he's got into no trouble."

Again he looked in the direction of the town, and at the dark lines of houses which stood out against the blacker sky.

"I don't know which way he will come," he kept on muttering. "Most likely from the town."

"I'll wait another five minutes, then, if he doesn't get here, I'll go forward alone."

Three of the allotted five minutes passed.

Then came indistinct sounds from Moffatsville, which finally merged into approaching footsteps.

"He comes at last," communed the solitary watcher.

"But stay! it will never do to be mistaken; it may be one of the townsmen or neighboring farmers."

And so saying, he stepped out of the road in among the clump of bushes—his previous hiding place.

Whoever was coming from the town was approaching rapidly.

His footfalls rang out on the hard road in measured rhythm.

At last he was almost abreast of the clump of bushes, when the shrill scream of a plover split the air.

The man instantly stopped and repeated what was evidently a signal between him and the man who was expecting him.

"All right, Tom," came a voice from the bushes, and the first man whom we have introduced stepped into the road.

"You're twenty minutes beyond your time," said this person grumblingly.

"Thought you'd forgotten all about your appointment, so was going on to old Moffat's myself."

Tom Endicott held up his hand deprecatingly.

"It's a wonder I got here at all," he replied.

"I made a miscue over in Brooklyn and nearly got into the hands of the police."

"Why, how was that?" the other demanded.

"Well, you see," explained Endicott, "Detective Gault has had a warrant for me for ever so long, and last night I happened to meet him at the corner of Court Street and Atlantic Avenue.

"He made a grab for me; I dodged and made a bee line for Tom Dacre's, and it was only by the skin of my teeth I escaped.

"Of course Dacre hid me in one of his secret rooms.

"The joint was searched by Gault and half a dozen policemen.

"But, as they didn't get onto the subterranean apartments in the sewer, of course I was safe; that is, so long as I stayed in hiding.

"At last police and detectives left, and here I am, Willis Hearn, without as much as a hair turned, though it was a close call, to say the least, my boy."

"Had you been caught," said Hearn, "it would have meant ten years' state prison."

"No, no; not quite that," corrected Endicott laughing. "But I have no doubt I'd have had to put seven years in Sing Sing."

"The longer you stay in Brooklyn the greater risk you run."

"Yes. That is true enough."

"And I won't stay a day longer than I can help, you may depend."

"What I want now to clear out, is the money."

"And that I hope to get to-night for you——"

"And yourself," interrupted Tom Endicott, dryly.

"But are you sure that you are right with regard to old Moffat's wealth?"

"They say he's a miser and all that sort of thing."

"But mere rumor, my dear fellow, is not proof."

"I'm aware of that as well as you, Endicott."

"I do not go by what those stupid villagers say; I have positive proof that the man is rich—with a couple hundred thousand dollars at the least—and furthermore that he is a man who has never banked and never will."

"Neither does he invest, which means that he has all the money by him."

"Yes; but how are you to get at it, that's the question?" Endicott asked.

"That part of the programme you must leave to me," Willis returned.

"You know, or must know, that I'm regarded by the old man favorably, and that I am indebted to him already to the extent of several hundred dollars, for which I have to cancel with exorbitant rates of interest when I come into my own—"

"When you come into your own?" in a mocking, not to say incredulous, tone.

"That's what I said—when I come into my own," repeated Hearn chuckling.

"When will that be?"

"You're a fool, Tom; why never, of course," and Willis Hearn laughed.

"Then it's a mere invention to placate old Moffat?"

"Why, of course; what else? A lie well told, and three quarters believed, is as good as the truth."

"However, we'd best be moving now, Tom."

"The old chap expects me at twelve."

"I mustn't keep him waiting, or he may smell a very large-sized mouse, which may need more force than I'd like to exert."

Tom Endicott well knew what this partly-veiled threat meant.

It meant that Willis Hearn, if he did not succeed in getting the miser's money in any other way, would resort to violence, probably to murder.

Endicott was an old jailbird and criminal, but so far his hands were clear of the blood of his fellow-man.

It was plain he did not like the suggestion, for he said:

"See here, Hearn! There must be no blood spilled in this case."

"Who is going to spill blood, you fool?"—from Hearn.

"I don't like the way you talk."

"It suggests violence. It suggests murder, in fact."

"If you're afraid to take a hand in the matter you'd better go back to Brooklyn," said Hearn, sullenly.

"If it comes to that I have no more fear than you," retorted Tom.

"But I have enough to answer for already, without having the murder of an old man on my hands."

"But let it come to that, even, and you'll not see me weaken."

"Now let's go on and make no more delay of it."

And so they went down the road, neither speaking a word to the other.

Both men were angry and busily thinking.

Hearn had fully made up his mind to have the old miser's money, even though it came to the shedding of his blood.

Tom Endicott was as fully determined that no blood should be shed—that is, if he could in any way prevent it.

And yet he was as firmly resolved to have a share of that two hundred thousand dollars, come what might.

Hearn had also another thought in his mind—that if the worst came to the worst he would rid himself of Endicott without scruple.

Had Willis Hearn known that his colloquy with Tom Endicott had been heard by one who had shadowed Endicott from Brooklyn, he would have trembled for the result.

But this he did not know, but was to find out later, as we shall see.

The two men had been walking thus silently for about a quarter of an hour when Hearn stopped suddenly.

"Hello!" said Tom; "have we got there?"

He could see a faint light to the left of the road.

It looked in the darkness like the glimmer of a star.

"Yes, there's the house, less than fifty yards from here, and to the left," was Hearn's reply.

"It wants but five minutes of twelve and at twelve sharp he expects me."

"Do you want me to wait here?" asked Endicott with the faintest trace of suspicion in his voice.

"Yes, it will be better than coming too nigh the house."

"Moffat, old as he is, has the eyes and hearing of an eagle, and if he suspected for a moment that anybody was with me that would be the end of it."

"Just wait where you are, and keep your eyes and ears open, for it won't do to be interrupted in this little scheme of ours."

"Who is likely to interrupt us?"

"Some belated townsman, or a farmer going to Brooklyn with his truck."

"Who knows?"

"It's better to be on the sure side, anyhow," with warning emphasis from Hearn.

"All right. Go ahead. But don't injure the old man more than you can help."

"Trust me for that," said Willis Hearn.

"Don't be impatient," he added.

"It may take twenty minutes to get through with him."

"Meanwhile keep your eyes open."

Endicott said he would do so, and drawing aside from the road, got under a hedge, took out a cigar and lighted it.

Without another word Hearn went down the highway, pausing before a queer-looking old building that was surrounded by half-rotten wooden palings.

The front of this structure had a dozen windows or more.

And from one of these windows on the first floor shot out a solitary light.

The light fell on Willis Hearn's face.

We have said that Hearn was good looking, and he was; but at that moment there was an expression on his face that made him absolutely hideous.

And that expression spelled "murder" as plainly as letters could spell.

Willis Hearn hesitated for a few moments before passing through the little wooden gate, as though some slight compunction of conscience arrested him.

Then opening the gate he passed into the little weed-covered plot in front, thence to the door of the house.

Knocking at the door he was presently admitted.

We shall not describe what took place between Andrew Moffat and his midnight visitor.

Any one who had been outside would have heard slight sounds of a struggle—a gurgling cry as of somebody choking—then all was still.

Twenty minutes later Willis Hearn emerged from the house, his hands and portions of his clothes covered with great splotches of blood.

His exit from the old building was as silent as his entrance.

But that the young man was in a condition of intense excitement could be seen at once—that is, if the night had been light enough for that purpose.

But it wasn't.

Even the yellow gleam from the lamp in the first floor window had gone out, leaving everything in absolute darkness.

Willis Hearn set about removing the blood from his hands and clothes—first at a little fountain in the center of the plot, and subsequently by the aid of his handkerchief and some weeds.

"Now," he muttered, when he had completed this, "to settle accounts with Tom Endicott."

"I must have no witnesses to this unlucky affair."

"If I could have got the money without resorting to doing away with the old fool, I should have done so."

"But he would have it, and I gave it to him for keeps."

"It was his own fault, though—nothing but his own fault."

According to Hearn's admissions, he had already committed one murder and now he was about to commit a second.

Willis Hearn waited in the little garden plot for at least a couple of minutes to control himself.

He had, as we have said, been intensely excited, and in his then condition he could not trust himself to face his waiting companion without giving himself time to think and quiet down a little.

Willis had to resort to a flask of spirit which he had with him.

A few good swallows of the brandy—for such was the liquor—made him feel better; and his nerves being now as calm as he could expect them, after his terrible act, he got out into the road and made for where he had left Endicott.

He had deliberately made up his mind to kill him.

So long as Tom was alive Willis considered that he was not safe, so he muttered to himself:

"I will fix him, too; then I'll be secure."

Tom was still waiting patiently under the hedge, smoking his cigar.

"So you've come at last," he said.

"I was just about making up my mind to go to sleep here."

"How did you find the old man?" he asked, with a laugh.

"Oh, all right."

"But the money is about as far off as ever, though."

"The devil!"

"How was that?" asked Tom.

"Didn't you succeed in making him show his money?"

"No."

"Have to come again to-morrow night."

"Old Andrew is in one of his queer moods."

"But tell me; any one passed since you've been here?"

"No, not a soul."

"Heard no one at all?"

"No one—not a footstep even; the whole place seems to be dead."

The assassin of the aged miser chuckled.

This was all he wanted to know.

And he prepared now to carry out the second part of his programme—the murder of Tom Endicott.

Suddenly he turned to the unsuspecting Tom, and summoning all his strength he dealt the unfortunate man a blow on the head with a slingshot which felled him to the earth.

The stroke was so terrific that it must have fractured his skull.

Tom Endicott never moved after that.

CHAPTER II.

WILLIS HEARN HAS BILL BEATTY TO DEAL WITH.

HAD Hearn had more than ordinary hearing when he knocked down Tom Endicott or had it been light enough, he might have discovered a third person hidden away among some bushes not more than half a dozen yards off.

But the young man was too deeply engrossed in his fell work to have even heard the suppressed cry that was made, when the wretched Endicott struck the earth.

"Guess that settled him," said Willis.

Striking a match he bent over the fallen man.

The sight that met his gaze in that momentary light made him shudder.

Tom Endicott lay in a pool of blood.

His head appeared to have been crushed in like an eggshell, and his face was corpse-like in its awful pallor.

"He's dead beyond a doubt," commanded the assassin.

"No use of staying here now. I must go back and finish my work."

Just then was heard the patter of heavy drops on the leaves of the tree above him.

It was an old elm tree, and came well over the road—forming an arch over part of it.

"Hum, the storm has begun," muttered Willis Hearn.

And as he spoke a sudden and almost blinding flash shot through the darkness.

This was followed by a startling peal of thunder.

Then as the murderer went back toward the house the rain fell in torrents.

The wind also swept shrieking through the trees.

The storm that was expected had come on in earnest.

No sooner had Willis Hearn disappeared than the silent and unknown watcher emerged from among the bushes.

For a moment he stood over the body of Tom Endicott.

Then he took a dark lantern from one of his pockets and, pushing back the slide, examined the fallen man.

"It looks as if you had passed in your checks, my poor fellow," said the stranger, "and yet it appears to me as though some life was left in you still."

"However, it'll never do to let you stay here."

"Luckily I have the means at hand to take good care of you—provided always that you have a fighting chance for your life."

"It may be a fracture of the skull, or it may not, but it is more likely that it's concussion of the brain."

He said no more, but sending the slide of his bull's-eye to, he hastily went along the road in the direction of the little town of Moffatsville.

He did not go very far when a signal from him, heard even above wind and rain, brought half a dozen men out to him.

They emerged from a lane that debouched from the highway.

A vivid flash from the darkened sky, which lasted but

for an instant, showed that these men were of powerful physique and rough appearance.

"Well, cap," said one of the foremost of the party, "what's to be done now?"

"Things have turned out different to what I expected."

"How was that?"

"Well," replied the cap evasively, "it's too long a story to tell you now."

"Have you the rig all right?"

"Yes," replied the man who had spoken before.

"It's a few yards up the lane."

"Any tarpaulin or canvas?"

"Plenty."

"Then go one of you and fetch it here."

"You, Randy"—to another of the men—"will get the rig to the mouth of the lane; the rest of you will come with me."

Though the men were surprised, they did not show undue curiosity, but went and did what they were told.

The tarpaulin was soon brought, and with four of his men, Bill Beatty—for this was the captain's name—went along the road to the point where Tom Endicott's body lay, and acting on their leader's instructions, they lifted the body and placed it on the tarpaulin.

"I don't think he's dead," said Beatty.

"If not he must have medical aid."

"I think it is a simple concussion of the brain."

"However, bear him to the rig and drive to the rendezvous."

"Then one of you go for old Dr. Bickars and let him see what he can do for the poor cuss."

"I'll tell you all about this afterward, boys; and now away with you as quick as you can."

"As to myself, I have something important to attend to which may possibly keep me half a dozen hours."

The men said not a word, but bore their ghastly burden to the waiting vehicle.

Two minutes later they were driving through the storm down the lane to the seaside, whither we for the present shall not follow them.

The storm had materially increased in fury by this time.

The branches of the trees were swaying wildly in the almost cyclonic wind that blew.

The rain fell in a perfect torrent.

But Beatty did not pay much attention to it.

He had other fish to fry, so to speak.

He knew that Willis Hearn had gone back to the miser's house.

He knew that both men had some designs on old Mofat's money.

But he did not know the full extent of Hearn's villainy.

In fact he had but a slight acquaintance with the man.

He knew that Willis held a clerkship in the principal store of Moffatsville, and he had been told that the young man had some expectations from an uncle in San Francisco, a wealthy mine owner.

He also knew that Willis Hearn was the associate of blacklegs and crooks in Brooklyn and New York—and some stray remarks from Tom Endicott, while the latter was under the influence of drink, put him onto Willis Hearn's scheme.

And that was one of the reasons he had followed Tom Endicott from Brooklyn, and had some of his men and a conveyance ready in a country lane as we have described.

"They say the old miser is rich," muttered Beatty.

"That is the main cause of those two fellows paying him a visit."

"If not, what else?"

A few fragments of the colloquy which occurred between Hearn and Endicott he had overheard.

But he was too far away to catch the drift of their conversation.

The neighborhood of Moffatsville was not wholly unknown to Bill Beatty, as the reader may conjecture from the order he had given to his men, to drive to the rendezvous—an old tumble-down house, within a quarter of a mile of the ocean.

This rookery was in the heart of a piece of woods that fronted the sea.

But more of it later.

When Beatty drew up before the miser's house, he saw a light flash from one of the windows on the ground floor.

The wind still roared, and the rain dashed down violently.

Occasionally a rumble of thunder and a vivid flash of lightning enlivened things generally.

"Dash it! I'm already wet to the skin!" muttered Beatty.

"Now to see what Hearn is up to!"

"He didn't do poor Tom up for nothing."

He passed through the old worm-eaten gate as Willis had done before him.

The lighted window was about four feet from the ground; but as Beatty was considerably over the average height it did not cause him much trouble to look into the room.

This was the sight which met him:

Willis Hearn sat at a deal table, which was worm-eaten from age and service.

On the table was an old-fashioned brass lamp. In front of Willis was a pile of written papers.

A brass-bound box stood to his right.

This apparently as yet had not been opened.

Willis was coolly glancing over the documents, and those which had no interest for him he threw on the floor.

Beatty grimly watched his every movement and, in spite of rain and wind, did not remove his eyes from him—not even for an instant.

It was not the most comfortable spot in the world—to be staying outside that window. But as Beatty said:

"I'm wet as it is; I cannot be any wetter."

So he bore it patiently and without flinching.

Finally Hearn had got through with the pile of papers.

Then he turned his attention to the brass-bound box.

In one hand he held a bunch of keys.

He tried one after another in the lock of the box, until his patience was nearly exhausted.

"What next?" thought Bill Beatty.

"Going to smash the box, eh?"

"And where is the miser?"

"Mr. Hearn appears to be having it all his own way."

Hearn didn't attempt to open the box by force, as Beatty expected he would have to do.

At last he found the right key, and turned it in the lock.

He next threw the lid of the box up.

An exclamation of astonishment and delight burst from him—very plainly heard by the watchful and listening Beatty.

"We're on the verge of a discovery," the crook muttered—"good yellow gold, or I'm much mistaken."

Yes, he was mistaken.

But he was none the less interested for all that.

Especially when he saw Hearn remove from the brass-bound box package after package of greenbacks—twenties, fifties, hundreds, such was the denomination.

"Better than the yellw dross," muttered Bill Beatty.

"And there he goes counting the first package."

"Guess it's no good waiting here any longer. I fancy I'll interrupt his calculations."

The captain of crooks thereupon pried the window open with a jackknife.

The roar of the storm and the dash of the rain against the grim panes prevented him from being heard.

Higher and higher went the window sash, until a gust of wind and a sheet of moisture blew into the room.

Then it was that Willis Hearn turned—turned like lightning.

But he was too late to prevent Beatty from leaping into the room.

"It is only me," said the captain of the crooks, with a coolness that staggered the murderer—"me, Bill Beatty, Esquire, at your service."

"How-do, Mr. Willis Hearn? Glad to see you well, sir!"

CHAPTER III.

WHERE GAULT TAKES THE CASE UP.

HAD a thunderbolt fallen at Willis Hearn's feet, he could not have been more surprised.

As a general thing Willis Hearn was a cool, nervy man, into whose composition so far very little fear had entered, but the appearance of Beatty in the moment of his triumph was a thing that he least expected, and for an instant he stood trembling and cowering before this (what was to him) terrible apparition.

He recognized the grim features of Beatty in an instant.

But he would as leave at that moment to have seen an officer of the law as a man whom he knew would have little or no mercy on him, had he the hardihood to refuse to do his bidding.

Beatty knew that he was playing with edged tools, so to speak.

He knew, in fact, that he had a desperate man to deal with—one who, if he gave him a chance, would even up things generally.

So knowing this he kept his eye riveted on him—prepared for any move Hearn might make.

"What a beautiful pile of bank bills you have, friend Hearn," began Beatty.

"Must be a hundred thousand or so in that heap; no counterfeit, and all as genuine as the bank."

"Sorry to have interrupted you, my dear fellow, but I was so much interested in the 'long green,' that I couldn't keep from coming in to pay my respects."

"Another little matter also actuated me—the storm; thunder, lightning, rain and what-not."

"You see, my dear Willis, I'm wet from head to foot and sadly need a change."

Hearn glared at the crook, as if he could have eaten him without salt.

"You have been spying on me," he managed to articulate.

He was regaining his lost nerve.

"Not quite that, my dear Hearn," repeated Beatty, airily.

"Then how did you get here?"

"By the usual process—my feet."

"You see, I was passing on my way to Moffatsville, when, overtaken by the storm, it occurred to me [to seek shelter somewhere].

"I remembered that there was a house hereabouts, kept by one Andrew Moffat, who has the reputation in these parts of being a Good Samaritan, and, seeing a light from the road, I concluded that Mr. Moffat had not retired, and by asking for it I might obtain shelter until the storm had subsided."

"Perceiving the light I quite naturally adopted the next process—which was to see who was at home—when, lo and behold, who should flash across my startled vision but my young and esteemed friend, Mr. Willis Hearn."

Hearn growled out an oath.

He did not believe a word that the other had said, as might naturally have been expected.

"Where's Mr. Moffat?" asked Beatty, nonchalantly, requesting Hearn to be seated.

"Gone to Brooklyn," sullenly from the young man.

"Indeed! And pray, when did that dear old gentleman go?"

"Don't ask me"—savagely.

"I had better help you count those bills, hadn't I?" said Bill, as he partly rose from the chair on which he had been sitting.

"No; guess you'd better not."

"The money belongs to Moffat, and it's at his request I'm arranging his affairs, preparatory to putting the cash in bank."

"These are documents I've been looking over"—pointing to the scattered papers on the floor.

"I see. Are they valuable?"

"They're legal, relative to mortgages and many other things, which it is not necessary for me to explain."

"I am now in the employ of Mr. Moffat, and that is why you see me here so late."

"Well, I can only say he has a very honest gentleman in his employment," replied Bill, with mock civility.

"But don't you think I might join you in the enumeration of the bills."

"No!" thundered Willis; "and I guess you'd better get out and attend to affairs that concern you."

"Your absence is better than your presence here, Mr. Beatty."

Beatty had already risen from his chair.

He saw there was some move working through the active brain of Willis Hearn.

And he soon perceived that he was not much mistaken.

As he rose to his full height, Willis Hearn suddenly drew a revolver from one of the pockets of his coat, and, taking aim as quickly, fired point blank at Beatty's head.

Had Bill not been prepared the bullet from the weapon must have perforated his skull.

Like a flash the crook threw his head aside, and the bullet passed within a couple of inches of his right temple and lodged in the crumbling wall of the room.

Before Hearn could fire again Beatty hurled himself on him and at once wrenched the weapon from his grasp.

"This popgun is better with me than with you," he said, without any evidence of anger in either manner or voice, "so I'll just take possession of it till you get into a little better temper."

"Sit down!"

"Listen to what I have to say."

"It will fare better with you, for maybe I know much more about this affair than you think."

"What part of the house is old Moffat in?"

"In no part of the house"—in a tone hardly audible to make out the words distinctly.

"What?"

"In no part of the house, I've said," with sullen and savage ferocity.

"Gone to Brooklyn, eh?"

"Yes."

"When will he be back?"

"Some time to-morrow."

"Come, now, what do you think I am, Hearn—a fool to believe all that?"

Then suddenly:

"Why, my dear fellow, you're all splashed with blood—there are great splotches of it on your hands, and on your clothes."

"Come, own up like a man—you've murdered old Moffat, haven't you?"

The last words left Beatty's lips with cold, stern emphasis.

Mechanically Willis Hearn looked down at his hands and his clothes.

There was no mistaking it.

Spots of blood dyed his coat and vest, while his white hands had not been washed clean of the blood that had spurted on them.

These were telltale evidences.

"Never mind," said Bill Beatty, coolly: "I don't want to frighten or to intimidate you."

"But I know old Moffat is here and murdered—and by you, Willis Hearn!"

"Nor will it take any protracted search to find the old miser's body."

"You shall come with me, if you won't still own up, and I will show you the body."

"Why, my dear fellow, I happened to see you do it."

Again was Hearn white of face and shaking like an aspen leaf.

Beatty went on.

"You have no need to be scared," he pursued.

"Nobody's going to blow the gaff on you unless you wish it."

"That, of course, is your own lookout."

"But let me put another question—where is our mutual friend, Tom Endicott?"

This was the last straw.

When this question was asked you might have knocked Willis Hearn down with a feather.

He sunk into a chair.

Covered his face with his hands.

Trembled so violently that he, in fact, might have had a fit of ague.

It was only when Beatty placed his hand on Hearn's shoulder reassuringly that he prevented the fellow from collapsing completely.

"Come," said Beatty to encourage him, "be a man; don't give way like that."

"Matters could have been worse than they are—much worse."

"What if old Moffat is dead? A few years more, at most, in the course of nature, would have put him under the sod."

"As it is, you and I will be the gainers by the operation."

"Have you counted that money? No? Well, let us count it, and see what we can do with old Moffat's body—by way of disposing of it."

"Do you hear, Hearn! The storm has already stopped, and if you want to make a clean job of it, and remove all evidences of the mur— I mean removal—we must get to work."

"Recollect, you have nothing to fear from me; all I want is my fair and square share of old Moffat's money—and then to clean things up generally and leave no evidence behind to point out how the old man disappeared."

"You spoke of Endicott?" said Hearn with ashen lips.

"Yes, but we have no time to bother with him now."

"One thing you may rest assured of is this—he is past doing you any harm."

"Now to work; let us get this boodle counted—then divide."

They counted the money in the packages.

There were two hundred and ten thousand dollars all told.

We shall not go to the trouble of describing what further took place.

But less than an hour later a farm wagon passed.

In it were two men—both burly and athletic Long Islanders.

Long before they had reached the spot they caught flickering lights, passing from window to window of the miser's house.

This seemed strange to the farmers, who were well acquainted with Andrew Moffat's habits, and his custom of retiring at midnight at the latest.

"Guess there's something up with old Andrew," remarked one of the farmers to the other.

"That flickering of lights in the old house just puzzles me."

"Yes," rejoined the other; "Andrew ain't in the habit of doin' no such a thing."

"It might be burglars or thieves o' some sort—who knows?"

"Let's go an' see if all's right; he can't eat our heads off, anyhow."

"No," replied the other.

"An' he's not a bad kind, after all, though he is a miser."

Now the rumbling of the heavy farm wagon coming up must have alarmed Beatty and his companion, for by the time the house was reached they had made good their escape by the rear of the old structure.

They left the light still burning, and the farmers, looking into the room, saw dozens of documents littering the floor, the brass-bound box on the table, whose lid was open, and many other evidences that made them conclude that the house had been burglarized and probably old Moffat murdered.

They endeavored to gain admittance to the building by rapping loudly on the panels of the front door with the butts of their whips.

But it was no use.

No one responded, and there was something funereal and solemn about the old place that woke their suspicions more and more.

"If I but dared I'd break the door open," said one farmer to the other.

"But I don't quite like to take so much on myself, either."

"In the first place it would be unlawful to burst a man's door in—in the second, Andrew Moffat himself might call me to account for it."

So one of the farmers decided to leave the other on guard while he went to Moffatsville to warn the justice of what was suspected.

Dawn was breaking when quite a number of the prominent citizens of Moffatsville accompanied the magistrate to the miser's residence.

While they were forcing the front door a stalwart, fine-built man on horseback rode up.

The magistrate recognized him at once.

It was Gideon Gault!

CHAPTER IV.

THE IMPRINTS UNDER THE WINDOW AND IN THE ROAD.

"One moment, Mr. Gault," hailed the magistrate, whose name was Herold.

Gideon Gault, seeing the crowd, rode up and dismounted.

"Where are you off to so early?" quoth the justice.

"I was about to put the same question," replied Gault, with a smile, "or something very much akin to it."

"What has brought you gentlemen all here?"

"Has old Mr. Moffat turned in his checks—or has there been a murder?"

It was not the first time that Gault expected to hear of Andrew Moffat's death by violence.

He had some eighteen months before told the old man what to expect—if he insisted keeping so much money in the house.

"The crooks of New York or Brooklyn will get wind of your wealth," he had said warningly, "and may pay you a visit when you least expect it."

"Take a fool's advice and bank your money."

"Either that, or leave this old house and get into the town, so as to be near your neighbors."

But old Andrew had not heeded Gault's warning, but persisted in staying where he was and running all the risks.

"I am afraid there has been a murder done," replied Mr. Herold, in answer to the detective's question.

"Would you mind seeing this out?" he asked.

They had already forced the front door of the house in.

"Just a moment," said Gault; and he went and tethered his mount to the palings.

Then he returned and said:

"I am at your service, judge."

"Though I hope you'll find things different to what you suspect," he quickly added.

"I trust you may be right," replied the magistrate.

A search of the old structure was at once begun.

They were not long in discovering that a recent fire had been made in a stove in one of the apartments of the first floor.

In fact the stove was still hot, and a queer effluvia came up from the partially consumed embers.

It had an odor for all the world like burned flesh.

As the morning grew lighter and as all evidences of the storm had cleared off, Gault's keen eyes were not long in detecting large, dark stains on the bare floor.

A further examination proved that they were splotches of blood, which had been hurriedly erased, but not sufficiently so, to prevent the fact from being seen.

This, together with the sickening odor from the ashes in the stove, disclosed to the detective that foul work had been done in the old house a short while before—probably during the early morning hours.

But in this apartment nothing further could be discovered.

In another room, however, tied in a great gunny bag was found a headless trunk, the blood still oozing from the neck.

The sight when revealed was so horrible that some of the townspeople turned sick, and had to go out into the open air to recover.

Where was the head of the decapitated man?

It might be in some other part of the old structure.

But Gault thought this was not likely, and that but for an unexpected interruption the assassins would have succeeded in getting away with the body, too.

That it was old Andrew Moffat's body was put beyond the peradventure of a doubt.

"You see," said Gault to the judge, "they had the trunk packed in this old bag and ready for removal, but the arrival of the farmers put them to flight."

"There's no doubt, however, but they have taken the head with them, and it may cause some trouble to find it."

This was conceded by everybody present.

"But whom, do you think, could have done such a terrible act?" asked Mr. Herold.

"It is the work of some daring crooks," promptly replied Gault.

"And they came from New York City," chimed in one of the townspeople.

"Quite a number of our outlying districts have been visited recently by the rascals, and robberies and hold-ups have been numerous."

"The assassins are more likely from Brooklyn," said Gault.

And he had good reason for saying this.

Though he did not think it necessary to explain just then why he should make such an assertion.

In an aside to Mr. Herold he admitted he was after one of the rascals himself, and information received late the night before had induced him to take the journey to Moffatsville in the hope of effecting the fellow's capture.

Then they went to the room in which the farmers had seen the light burning, and all the written papers littered on the floor.

The brass-bound box came in first for Gault's attention.

"This is where the old gentleman kept valuable papers and money," was the detective's instant comment.

"But whatever wealth he had the assassins made a clean sweep of it."

He looked all through the now empty box, which had various compartments, and which could doubtless carry a great amount of treasure in the shape of bonds and bank bills.

"Oh, yes, they've made a clean sweep of it," he went on.

"What was Mr. Moffat supposed to be worth?"—turning to the judge.

"The report (how true it is I'm unable to say) said he was worth from two hundred and thirty to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"But in my opinion nobody knew really what he was worth."

The farmers picked up the written papers from the floor.

Some were letters.

Others were mortgages on real estate, none of which could be of any value to the thieves, so that they had left

them littered on the floor, after having first cursorily examined them.

One paper, too, was picked up.

It was an acknowledgment that one Willis Hearn had received the sum of seven hundred and fifty dollars from Andrew Moffat.

This paper was dated two months before, and signed by Hearn.

The truth was that Hearn had been looking for this document and had, in the hurry of his examination, missed and thrown it on the floor with the rest of the documents.

This was one reason for the papers being scattered about the place instead of being left on the table, or in the box.

"Does anybody know this Willis Hearn?" questioned Gault, as he continued turning the receipt over in his hands as though that would explain the mystery.

"Yes," replied Mr. Herold; "I guess we're all pretty well acquainted with him."

"He is a clerk in one of the principal stores in Moffatsville."

"A native of Moffatsville, eh?" said Gault, as he kept still fingering the paper.

"No, not a native, though he has been here between two and three years."

"A Californian, I believe."

"What is his general reputation?"

"Good; and very popular with the Moffatsville people."

"Hard working?"

"None more so."

"Saving?"

"Well, I can't answer as to that," replied Mr. Herold. "He did not appear to me to be a young man who lived above his income, and he was, further than this, a strict church member."

Gault smiled.

There were many apparently strict church members who, when found out, proved to be great rogues.

This at least was Gault's experience.

"Come of good stock?"

This was the detective's next question.

"His people, I understand," answered the magistrate, without hesitation, "move in the best circles San Francisco society."

"Is the young man single or married?"

"Single."

"In fact he's engaged to one of the most estimable young ladies in Moffatsville."

"Is his salary such as to support a wife?"

"I should judge so."

"The young man is in receipt of a hundred dollars a month—"

"That ought to keep him very nicely," Gault interrupted.

Then, looking at the receipt again:

"But here we have him running into debt to Andrew Moffat to the amount of seven hundred and fifty dollars. That needs explaining, I fancy, don't you?"

"Well, it does look rather queer," the magistrate admitted.

"I knew he had some acquaintance with Moffat. But this is the first I've heard of his borrowing money from him."

"Precisely," pursued Gault. "And it is not likely a man of Mr. Moffat's character would have advanced so much, unless on good security."

"What are the young man's prospects?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean with regard to his family connections on the Pacific Slope?"

The magistrate shook his head.

It was quite plain that he didn't know and intimated as much.

But the marshal of Moffatsville appeared to be better informed, for he replied:

"It appears that he is a favorite nephew of a very old and wealthy retired merchant, who has made a will in his favor."

"Don't think you've got that right, neighbor," interrupted another of the townsmen; "I heard Mr. Hearn say himself it was an aunt, the widow of a rich shipowner."

"I guess you're both wrong," chimed in a third, with emphasis.

"The one from whom he is to inherit the fortune is a mine owner, for I heard him say so myself one day I was in old Brimley Richard's store, where he happened to drop in."

"Hum!" said Gault, dryly.

"Mr. Hearn's stories will soon be as numerous as specks on the sun."

"Some one must be exaggerating, surely."

"The young fellow's all right, I suppose," put in still another.

"But it occurs to me there's some tall lying somewhere, and I don't think it would be very hard to trace it to its source."

"Its source? What do you mean?" interrupted a townsman.

"Who is lying, I should like to know?"

"Mr. Hearn himself, doubtless," interjected Gault.

"His stories don't dovetail, nor does this paper."

And Gault flipped the acknowledgment across the palm of his hand.

"I must see that young gentleman," he added to himself.

Then he put the receipt for the seven hundred and fifty dollars carefully away, and proceeded with his inspection of the room.

But nothing further was disclosed.

Then every apartment in the house underwent a similar examination, even to the cellars and the old attics.

But no further clew was found.

Walls were sounded for secret hiding places where Andrew Moffat might have concealed his wealth; besides, every closet and corner in the house was searched in vain.

There was not a dollar discovered anywhere, and not a document or written paper outside those that were found in the room where the brass-bound box was.

"It's no use," said Gault, at last giving up the search; "the vagabonds have made off with everything of value they could lay hands on, and further searching will amount to nothing."

"Well, what's to be done now?" asked one of the farmers who had conveyed the news to Mr. Herold at Moffatville.

"Nothing, only to notify the coroner," said Gault.

"I'll see that that's done at once," said the justice.

And he sent the marshal back to Moffatville for that purpose.

But Gault was by no means through with his examination yet.

"You had a pretty severe rainstorm here last night," he observed to Mr. Herold.

"Yes, about half-past twelve," replied the magistrate.

"It had been threatening all the evening, and when the rain did come down it fell in bucketfuls, and the wind blew like a hurricane, not to mention the thunder and lightning, which were appalling."

"It didn't last long?"

"No, not more than an hour or two, I should judge."

"But it was a merry old storm while it did last," added Mr. Herold.

Gault had an idea in regard to that same storm.

It occurred to him that there might be left impressions of the murderers' footgear, which might come in handy if measured in time—before they could be obliterated by the feet of others.

Once the news of the miser's murder got bruited about through the country hundreds, probably thousands, of people would be attracted to the spot, and so remove marks that might prove valuable clews in hunting down the perpetrators of this horrible act.

Gault stole out into the plot in front of the old house, and quietly looked about among the weeds and sodden grass.

He could see where both had been trodden down in many places.

But there was no chance of measurements there.

Then he traced the steps under the window of the apartment where Beatty had surprised Willis Hearn.

Here in the mold the impressions were more distinct, and he took accurate measurements of two great clumsy boots.

"These boots were on a big, heavy man," he reflected.

"But here are impressions of feet fully an inch shorter and ever so much narrower."

These he too measured and jotted down in his notebook.

Then he went out into the road and saw similar footprints leading in the direction of Moffatville.

Under a hedge at the roadside were more footprints.

But these were utterly unlike the first two, being long and narrow, especially at the toes.

The heels of boots, which must have been high, were dug into the ground, as though by somebody impatient of delay.

There was also a stump of a cigar almost trodden under foot, as well as several half-burned matches.

Gault picked up the butt of the cigar and looked at it.

As it was under the cover of the thick hedge, the rain had not soaked it as it must otherwise have done had it been more exposed.

"There have been more than two in this crime, I clearly perceive," Gault muttered.

The fellow at this point was evidently on the watch while the others were at work, and he was impatient, too; that is easily seen."

Gault traced faint impressions into the middle of the road.

Here, too, was something that puzzled him.

There was a pool of blood which had been partly washed away by the last night's rain.

But there was ample evidence that a struggle had taken place at that point, which, judging from other evidences, must have been of the most deadly character.

This was the detective's conclusion.

But he was only in part right, as the reader already knows.

It was where Tom Endicott had received the treacherous blow of the slingshot, wielded by the hand of Willis Hearn.

CHAPTER V.

GIDEON GAULT PURSUES HIS INVESTIGATIONS.

GAULT now traced the imprints of steps farther along the road.

They were the impressions of the boots of the men who had carried Endicott to the wagon the night before.

The imprints were at regular intervals, (one from the other) so Gault was not long in arriving at a conclusion in this matter, too.

"There has been a struggle—and a deadly one," he said to himself.

"One of the struggling men has been either killed or badly wounded—and he has been borne away by either friends or foes."

He got to the mouth of the lane, where the footprints ceased.

But here were the deep impressions of the tires of the wheels of some vehicle, as the lane was of a clayey character and showed much more than the less impressionable mold of the highway.

Gault passed along the lane for some distance.

The impressions of the tires in the soft earth were still as deep as ever.

There were the imprints of horse's hoofs likewise, which proved pretty accurately to the detective that the vehicle had only one horse attached.

Gault further discovered that the horse had lost one of its shoes.

Making mental notes of this, and not desiring to go farther down the lane just then, he retraced his steps to the road.

And from there he went back to the house.

Passing once more into the grounds of the tumble-down rookery where the miser had lived, the detective made his way to the rear of the structure.

He had heard the farmers' story about the moving lights and the queer sounds which they had heard, so concluded that the murderers, bearing the approach of the lumbering farm wagon, which must of necessity have made considerable noise, had taken alarm and made hasty flight by the rear of the building.

If this were the case, they would have had to pass through several fields and meadows before emerging into another thoroughfare.

We have already said that Gault had made his measurements of the impressions of boots he had seen under the window in front of the house.

At this point were more, and deeper ones, which caught his eye.

Yes, there were the two-sized imprints, as at first.

He measured them.

They tallied exactly.

In the rear of the miser's house was a quickset hedge. It answered as a boundary, as the palings did in front. But as it had not been attended to in years, there were large rents here and there through which almost anybody could pass with ease.

The detective discovered that it was by one of these rents in the quickset hedge that the two men, whoever they were, had made good their flight from the old building on the farmers' approach.

Gault passed through one of the openings into the ad-

joining field, thence into a meadow, thence again into a field of turnips and potatoes.

The tracks of the fleeing men were totally distinct up to this.

Then they ceased all at once, as though the murderers had in some enigmatical way doubled on their tracks.

At a certain point of the plowed field was a stone wall, about four feet high.

This wall was loosely put together, as is usual in country districts, and extended some thirty or forty yards where it was met by a fence of wood rails, which in turn was joined by a ragged hedge of hawthorne and elderberry bushes.

Gault went over and made a thorough examination of this peculiarly constructed fence.

On the other side was an extensive meadow of "timothy," and the detective perceiving the futility of pursuing his investigations further in this direction retraced his steps and went back to the house.

He found the same crowd there as when he left, with the addition of the coroner of the district.

The coroner had already got together a jury, who were deliberating on their verdict.

A little later came some more interesting cause for excitement.

The marshal of Moffattsburg had brought a woman in—a poor, wretched, half-starved creature some two-and-thirty years of age or so.

She looked as though she had been out in the storm all night.

Her gown was bedraggled and covered with mud.

Her hat had been drenched by the wet.

Its feather drooped despondently over her disheveled hair.

Taken in all, she was a most pitiful sight—a homeless wanderer with no one to care for or care for her—a vagrant of vagrants!

The woman was brought into the room where the brass-bound box lay still on the table, and the litter of written papers, scattered here, there and everywhere over the room floor.

"Your honor," began the marshal, "the woman wants to be committed to the workhouse."

"But first," he went on, "she would like to have a few words with your honor."

"She says she has important information in her possession, so would like to speak to you in private."

"As to what?" asked the magistrate, looking at the newcomer.

"In regard to the murder done last night."

This occasioned a buzz of excitement.

There were some eight or nine people present at the time, among them the two farmers.

The coroner was holding his inquest in the apartment adjoining in which the mutilated trunk of the miser had been found.

"What does she know about the murder?" asked the judge, glancing significantly at Gault.

"She says she may furnish a clew to the murderers," was the marshal's rejoinder.

"Very well, then; clear the room," said Mr. Herold, briskly.

"I think you had better stay, Mr. Gault"—as he saw the detective was about to leave with the others, "as all this is in your line, you know."

"I suppose I can stay, too?" chimed in the marshal, who was curious to hear what the woman had to say.

"Yes, you may remain," said Mr. Herold.

There was something in this woman's looks that Gault did not like.

At first sight she was the most pitiful object he had ever seen.

Nobody could have presented a more wretched appearance and one evidently deserving of more pity.

Still there was that about the woman's eyes, at second glance, that the detective didn't like, so that he couldn't help putting her down for considerable of a fraud.

"Now, my good woman, speak up," said the magistrate; "do I understand that you want to go to the workhouse?"

"Yes, sir," came from the vagrant, almost inaudibly.

"Speak up; don't be afraid," said the kind-hearted Mr. Herold, gently.

"What is your object for asking to be sent to the workhouse?"

"Simply because I have no other place to go," was the reply.

The tones of the woman's voice Gault didn't half like. They indicated, if anything, cunning and evasion.

CHAPTER VI.

MARY HARRITY'S STORY.

"You are homeless, eh?" said the little magistrate. The woman looked askance at Gault.

Intuitively she knew that he suspected her, and a bitter sneer curled her lips.

It was ever so slight, and so escaped Mr. Herold's less curious gaze.

"You are homeless, eh?"

"Yes," the woman blurted out.

"It's not likely I'd have come here if I wasn't."

"How long would you like to be committed?"

"To the workhouse you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, anywhere from six months to a year," impudently from the vagrant.

"What's your name?"

"Mary Harrity."

There was no "siring" about her now, and the little magistrate was somewhat nettled at her want of respect for his official position.

He whispered a few words to the marshal of Moffattsburg.

That worthy nodded and withdrew.

"Now, Mary Harrity," said Mr. Herold, less gently, "where were you born?"

"I don't know that that has anything to do with the case," replied the woman.

"But if you're so particular to know my place of birth—Raymond Street, Brooklyn."

"Well, as it's your desire to be sent to the workhouse I'll send you there," replied the magistrate, bluntly, "and as it's your wish—for twelve months."

"I'll write and sign your commitment when the marshal returns."

Then, turning to Gault, who had been a close observer of the woman during the foregoing questions and answers, he said:

"Now, Mr. Gault, it is your turn to take her in hand."

"You are better at this business than I."

"See what she knows about the murder of Andrew Moffat."

"No, that won't do at all," the vagrant objected bluntly.

"I came to speak to the magistrate, not to any Mr. Gault."

"Who is Mr. Gault, anyhow?" she demanded with an insolent look at Gideon.

"A detective, madam," replied Gault, meeting her look of defiance with a smile.

"A New York central office man, eh?" she blurted out.

"No, a Brooklynite—and at your service."

"Do you really know anything of the murder?" he questioned, in a tone of incredulity, looking her straight and squarely in the eye.

She could not meet his gaze and her eyes drooped.

He repeated his question.

"Yes, I certainly do know something of it," she replied in a defiant voice, and flashing a look of resentment at the detective.

"If I didn't I shouldn't have come here."

"But you came to be sent to the workhouse?" smiled Gault.

"It was not the main purpose of my errand," flashed the vagrant, who appeared by no means uneducated.

"Hum," said Gault; "how long have you been in this neighborhood?"

"I'd prefer telling that to the judge," she snapped.

"Better answer Mr. Gault's questions," coldly from Herold.

"Yes, ma'am, I think you had better."

"When were you last in Brooklyn?"

"Three days ago."

This reply came with very bad grace. It was evident that she didn't care about having anything to do with Gideon.

"Three days ago?"

"Yes."

"Did it take you three days to travel from Brooklyn to Moffattsburg?"

"I took it leisurely and stopped on the road."

"How long have you been in the habit of going round in this way?"

"Since my husband died."

"You were married, then?"

"Yes."

"Was your husband a Brooklyn man?"

"No; he was born in New York City."

"How long is he dead?"
 "Between three and four years."
 "Any children?"
 "No."
 "And you have been going about in this way ever since your husband's death?"
 Now Gault had an object in all these questions.
 Something told him that he had seen her before, and the longer he looked at her the more he was convinced that she was playing some deep game, the purpose of which was not so clear as he would wish it.
 Her husband?
 She said he was dead.
 Gault had another opinion.
 He was sure that her husband was a crook, and that she was also one.
 By degrees the woman's face came back plainer and plainer to him.
 In reply to the detective's last question Mary Harrity answered:
 "Yes; I've been living from hand to mouth ever since my husband's death, the life of an outcast and a wanderer."
 This last clause was not uttered with any bitterness—there was no sadness in its intonation—the very opposite; it was flippant in the extreme.
 Even the little judge, Mr. Herold, could not fail but see this; and he was fain to turn away disgusted.
 "What do all these questions tend to?" he asked of Gault.
 "Why not come to what she knows of the murder of Moffat?"
 "Or," added he aside, "does she know anything of it at all?"
 "She has an object in being here, depend on it," replied Gault, in a tone that she could not hear.
 "She no more wants to go to the workhouse than I do.
 "She is not what she represents herself, by a considerable number of points—you mark my words for it."
 The woman tried to catch what was being said.
 But failed.
 "Now I shall get her to tell her cock-and-bull story," Gault continued in the same tones; "and I'll venture to say that there's not a word of truth in anything she says."
 "Then why waste time with her?" said the justice.
 "I have an object. Wait."
 To further questioning Mary Harrity said that her husband had at one time a second-hand clothes store on Seventh Avenue, New York—that was before she married him.
 After that he evolved into a race track tout.
 Then into a bookmaker.
 Subsequently he became a backer of pugilists.
 The final end was that he drank heavily, and wound up his career in the alcoholic ward at Bellevue Hospital.
 Most of this Gault was sure had been cut from the whole cloth.
 In plain English Mary Harrity was lying.
 Gault now recalled a scene at the Tombs Police Court where he was positive he had seen Mrs. Harrity a prisoner for picking pockets.
 "Now, Mrs. Harrity," said Gault when she had got thus far, "will you be good enough to tell us how long you have been in the neighborhood of Moffatsville?"
 "I got here last night," replied the woman, less reluctant now to answer the detective's questions than before.
 "Last night?"
 "Yes."
 "What time last night?"
 "About a quarter of eleven, as near as I can judge."
 "That was before the storm?"
 "Yes, sir, an hour and a half before the storm."
 "You were going on to Moffatsville, were you?"
 "Yes."
 "Had you any business at Moffatsville?"
 The woman laughed.
 "Gracious me!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands, "what business could I have there?"
 "You had no business that would take you there, then?"
 "None—unless what I have been doing for some years past."
 "What is that?"
 "Do you want me to tell you the plain English of it?"
 "Certainly."
 "Well, cadging."
 "What does she mean by cadging?" asked the magistrate.

"You are precious green for a beak," said the woman, interrupting him with a chuckle.
 "She means begging," Gault explained.
 "H'm! I understand," said Herold.
 Then there were no further interruptions from him.
 Gault proceeded:
 "But you didn't get to Moffatsville?"
 "No, sir."
 "You stopped on the way?"
 "Yes."
 "Where?"
 "Not far from Mr. Moffat's house, under a hedge at the roadside."
 "Why did you stop there?"
 "Because I was tired—fatigued—could scarce drag one foot after the other."
 "When was that?"
 "Quarter of eleven, as I told you."
 "Last night?"
 "Yes."
 "Did you go to sleep under the hedge—that is the spot under which you chose your resting place?"
 "No."
 "Why not?"
 "Simply because I was too tired even to sleep. A pretty bad dose of insomnia I should call it," declared Mr. Harrity.
 "Could you see Mr. Moffat's house from where you were resting?"
 "Yes, quite distinctly."
 "It was very dark, was it not?"
 "As black as a wolf's mouth."
 "Could you point me out the spot where you sat from this window?"
 The detective walked over to the window.
 "I think I could," said the woman, following him.
 "Now point it out!"
 "There it is!"
 And Mrs. Harrity indicated that part of the hedge with her index finger.
 "That point of vantage put you in full command of the house," said the detective, "and all the approaches leading to it—that is, by the front."
 "Decidedly."
 "Had Mr. Moffat retired?"
 "You mean when I took up my resting place under the hedge?" said the woman.
 "Yes."
 "No; I don't think he had."
 "Why?"
 "Because one of the windows was illuminated."
 "Which?"
 "The window of this identical room that we're in."
 "Well, what took place then—I mean when you were taking a much-needed rest?"
 And Gault smiled.
 He was in hopes to enmesh her in her own net before she had proceeded much further.
 "Half a dozen rode up."
 Gault at once knew this to be a lie.
 "Half a dozen men?" he repeated.
 "Yes."
 "From which direction did they come?"
 "From Moffatsville?"
 "No, the very opposite direction," replied Mrs. Harrity.
 "Well?"
 "They dismounted."
 "And after that?"
 "They secured their horses to those trees you see there"—and she pointed to some old elms to the left of where she had been resting the previous night—"and having done that four of the party approached the old house."
 "Where were the other two?" asked the detective with a grim smile at Herold.
 "They were left in the road on guard."
 "That is, to guard the approaches to the house—"
 "Yes," the woman quickly interrupted, "and to warn their comrades should any one come up the road."
 "And had they occasion to do so?"
 "No."
 "Why?"
 "Because nobody came."
 "Did these two men in the road happen to discover that you were under the hedge?"
 "No, indeed; they did not, and I'm glad they didn't."
 "You are glad they didn't?"
 "Yes, because they would have murdered me."

"So I crouched closer to the hedge, and kept precious quiet, I can tell you."

"Well, that, of course, was only natural," said Gault, leading her on.

He could see now that Mary Harrity, as she called herself, was lying all the way through.

But what was her object in doing so was not so clear.

Had she any connection with the murderers?

The detective had already concluded that she must have had, and that she had been sent to screen the real culprits by her mythical story of six men, who had ridden up during the time she was resting.

"Well," said Gault, "your account sounds plausible, Mrs. Harrity, very plausible."

"It's the truth, sir"—from the woman in the tones of a virago; "I have no object in lying, let me tell you."

"Neither have you an ax to grind," chimed in Gault, laughingly.

"Of course that's all taken for granted."

"But another question," added he.

"When did those four men leave Mr. Moffat's?

"That is, how long did they stay?"

"Probably twenty minutes."

"That would have been about half an hour after eleven?"

"Yes," Mrs. Harrity answered.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COMMITMENT.

THE little justice was not very much impressed with Mary Harrity's story.

He saw that Gault did not believe it, and, to tell the truth, he was beginning to discredit it himself.

"So the four men stayed in the house about twenty minutes?" repeated the detective.

"Yes. That was the time as near as I can judge," Mary Harrity answered.

"Did you hear any sounds of a struggle during the time that the four men were in old Mr. Moffat's house?"

"Yes; and I heard a pistol shot."

"A pistol shot, eh?"

Gault knew well that no pistol had been fired, and if there had been a struggle the wretched old man had taken no active part in it.

As to the pistol shot, there was not the least evidence that one had been discharged.

This lie, also, was made of the whole cloth.

"Yes," pursued the woman, "I heard the firing of a pistol distinctly."

"And after that?"

"All was still."

"I knew that the pistol shot had done the poor old man's business for him."

"Was the storm on at this time?"

"No."

"What o'clock do you think it might have been?"

"Not much after half-past eleven, if that," Mrs. Harrity replied.

"Does this tally with your first statement?"

"I think it does."

"Hum! Well, when the four men left the house, what did they do?"

"They came out into the road, of course."

"Which way? By the front?"

"Certainly."

"And they joined the other two men who were on guard?"

"That's what they did."

"Did you notice whether either of those four men had anything with him?" Gault asked.

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Harrity.

"Had any of them a bundle or parcel, for instance?"

The woman pretended to think for a moment.

"Yes," she answered deliberately after awhile.

"One of the men had a large leather bag."

A significant exchange of looks between the detective and Mr. Herold.

Gault's look seemed to say as plain as words:

"She's gone as far as she can go now."

"We have her at the end of her tether."

"All she has uttered so far is one huge tissue of fabrications."

The little judge's glance seemed to say:

"What do you think of her?"

"That story about the pistol shot is all fudge."

"As to the leather bag, that's all right no doubt."

"It belonged to Andrew Moffat, and was the means of carrying away his wealth."

"You say one man had a leather bag?" questioned Gault.

"How do you know it was a leather bag?"

"Because I saw it."

"You said at first, if I make no mistake, that it was so dark that you could scarce see your hand in front."

"And so it was," returned the woman unabashed.

"But you appear to forget that light in the window."

"It was when they left the house that I saw the bag—as they passed through that strong shaft of light reflected at the time from this very window."

And Mary Harrity pointed emphatically to the miry panes which barely let the sunlight through.

"Well, the men came out into the road," said Gault, leading Mary Harrity to further lying admission.

"Yes."

"Then what came next?"

"They all went a little way down the road."

"What to do?"

"I don't know."

"That was a good chance for you to escape and give the alarm," said the detective with the least semblance of a smile, which for once aroused the woman's ire pretty emphatically.

"Yes, escape—and have my throat cut," she retorted, with a bitter sneer.

"No, thank you; I'm no such fool."

"Besides, it was no business of mine—and I didn't mean to run any risk anyhow."

"No, seemingly not," from Gault, with dry emphasis.

"Well, Mister Detective, how much more are you going to ask me?"

She looked at the detective impudently.

"Not much," he returned calmly.

"The men returned to their mounts after awhile, of course?"

"Yes," the woman replied; "they were not two minutes away altogether."

"And when they came back they mounted and rode off, I suppose?" dryly from Gault.

"Yes; that's what they did."

"What did you do then?"

"I was so fatigued and worn out that I dropped off to sleep."

"Under the hedge?"

"Yes."

"And you knew that a murder had been done?"

"I guessed it."

"You did not know positively?"

"I didn't give it much thought," Mrs. Harrity answered, "one way or the other."

"I had too many troubles of my own to attend to—and I was so worn out into the bargain that I could scarcely keep my eyes open."

"Did the storm wake you?"

"No."

"You slept through all that rain and wind, thunder and lightning?"

"Just as a child might sleep," the woman rejoined.

"When I awoke I found myself wet to the skin—and day was just breaking."

"A very extraordinary woman you are," remarked Gault.

"Not one woman in a hundred thousand would have slept under those circumstances."

"Do you think you could recognize any of the six men if you saw them again?"

"I think I could."

"How is that? Recollect you said it was so dark that—"

"Yes, I did say it was dark," Mrs. Harrity interrupted; "maybe one of the blackest and dreariest I've ever been out in."

"But," pursued she, "you seem to forget that four of those men stood within the radius of that light coming from the window, so that their features and forms were more or less lit up."

"Now I'll give you their descriptions as near as I can," she went on.

"Do so, if you please."

"What's the use?" whispered Mr. Herold.

"It's only a pack of lies she's telling."

"We may get at some grains of truth," whispered Gault.

"That settles it; go on," returned the justice.

He could see no point in this questioning and cross-questioning of the woman.

He was getting a little bit tired of it.

But Gault, as we have said before, had an object in all this.

That object was time.

He knew now who this woman was.

It had dawned on him suddenly.

Her miserable, bedraggled attire and famished appearance had deceived him at first.

Then her request to be sent by the magistrate to the workhouse appeared the genuine outcome of misery and starvation—so that the detective at first couldn't help pitying her.

He very soon disabused his mind of that feeling, however.

His discovery of who the woman really was settled her story as far as he was concerned pretty effectually.

Mary Harrity was not Mary Harrity at all.

This was only an alias—in short, one of many.

Her real name, so far as known to Gault, was Nellie Remsen—an expert pickpocket and shoplifter.

Nellie Remsen was one of the most expert in criminal lines.

She had furthermore been quite a clever actress in her time, and might have got on well histrionically, but for her meeting with an unscrupulous fellow who followed the race course, and who subsequently became one of the "swell mob," and was finally landed for a term in prison.

When he emerged from his enforced confinement in the Kings County Penitentiary he at once identified himself with a tough gang of crooks who had their rendezvous in Smoky Hollow.

This man was known as Ben Remsen, and was supposed to be the husband of Nellie Remsen, alias Mary Harrity.

The woman now set about describing the four men.

"It may be imperfect," she declared, "but it's as near as I can get to it.

"They were all men of about six feet tall, strongly built—regular athletes, in fact.

"They were all clean shaven, not one having even a mustache.

"I should guess that their hair was either a very dark brown or a decided black.

"They all wore broad-brimmed, soft felt hats, and looked very much like men one may meet in Nebraska or Dakota, or some of those Northwestern States."

"Like Buffalo Bill's cowboys or circus men?" put in Gault, dryly.

"We hear a great deal lately of cowboys and fellows connected with the 'Wild West.'

"It would seem that every robbery and 'hold-up' that's done now is attributed to those people.

"Well, they have good shoulders, and can stand it," he added significantly.

"Well, Mrs. Harrity, go on; that is, if you have anything more to say."

"Well, the four men I'm endeavoring to describe were really good-looking fellows, not one of whom was above thirty years of age.

"That's all I know," Nellie Remsen ended abruptly.

"Not all, surely?" said Gideon.

Nellie at once noticed the sneer which curled the detective's lip, and was bound to resent it by the most bitter and malevolent look she could give him.

"You don't believe me?" she said.

"I didn't say so."

"But that's what your looks imply?"

"You mustn't go by looks at all times, Mrs. Harrity."

At that instant in came the marshal of Moffatville.

He had pen, ink and a written document with him.

"Will your honor please sign this?" he said, handing the judge the writing materials.

Mr. Herold took the document from the marshal in a half-dreamy sort of way.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The commitment."

"What's the period?" asked Mr. Herold again.

"Twelve months, your honor."

"Well, Mary Harrity, you're booked for one year at your own request," said his honor, as he attached his signature to the paper.

He handed the document back to the marshal.

At that moment came an interruption that only one man in the room expected, and of which even he was not so certain either.

This man was Gideon Gault.

CHAPTER VIII.

NELLIE REMSEN SHOWS HER NERVE.

THE nature of the interruption that came on the four people so suddenly was the entrance of a man into the room.

It was Silas Goodrich, the Long Island detective, whom we have introduced to the reader in other numbers of this series.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Silas, beaming on the magistrate and his marshal.

Mr. Herold and his aid regarded the newcomer with astonishment.

It was apparent that they did not know him.

That they had never seen him before.

The little magistrate was about to ask who he was, when Gault, with a smile, said:

"Allow me, Mr. Herold, and you, marshal, to introduce you to my friend, Mr. Silas Goodrich—otherwise the Long Island detective, whose name no doubt is as familiar to you as my own, which I'm inclined to think is pretty thoroughly known hereabouts."

Gault did not utter the last clause through any egotistical feeling.

But he had said that which was true.

No man's name was more widely known in Moffatville and through the surrounding county than Gideon's.

He had already been engaged in many important cases in the neighborhood—notably a remarkable case of abduction which had taken place in the locality many years before.

The moment that Goodrich's eyes fell on Nellie Remsen, alias Mary Harrity, he started.

The woman seemed to shrink within herself.

The apartment would have been much lighter had the windows been cleaned.

But with the grime of years on them the sunlight filtered through the dirty panes in an almost ineffectual struggle to show some brightness about the place.

Notwithstanding this Goodrich had recognized the woman.

It is due to Gault to state at this point that Goodrich had already arrested Nellie Remsen half a dozen times for pocket-picking, as well as on charges of shoplifting.

Approaching the apparently forlorn-looking creature, Mr. Goodrich extended his hand, saying with mock politeness:

"Hello, Nellie! This is an unexpected pleasure! How do?"

Mrs. Harrity's eyes dropped.

"I don't know you," she said huskily.

"Not know me?"

"Well, now, that's strange," said the detective.

"Aren't you Nellie Remsen?"

"No."

"Nor Maude van Zile?"

"No."

"I never saw you before, my good man," the woman snapped out.

"I know you by three other aliases, I think, if my memory serves me."

"You have the advantage of me, sir."

"Never saw me before, hey?"

"Never."

"Then you are not Nellie Remsen, nor are you Maude van Zile, nor yet are you Theodora Cook."

"And what's that other name?"

"Oh, yes, I recollect now—you used to be Mrs. Mary Harrity, if I remember rightly."

"I did not expect to see you in this condition, Mrs. Harrity."

"Business must be indeed very bad when you have taken to tramping round the country in this garb."

"Her name is Harrity, sure enough!" chimed in the little justice.

"That, at least, is the name we have on her commitment paper."

"Her commitment paper!"

"What does that mean?"

"Explain, Mr. Gault, will you, please?" said Herold.

"Assuredly," said Gault.

And he did so—in a very few words.

"I never heard of such a thing," cried Goodrich.

He raised his brows in pretended surprise.

"What does this mean, Nellie?" asked he.

"Want to go to the workhouse for twelve months, eh?"

"Are the heavens going to fall?"

"Not quite," interjected Gault.

"Mary has only been playing a little trick on my good friend, Mr. Herold."

"She doesn't mean a word of it!"

"I should rather think not!" exclaimed Goodrich.

"Twelve months removed from active life would be absolute ruin to the lady."

Nellie Remsen darted a look of the most bitter resentment at Goodrich.

"You have hunted me long enough," she said.

"You have been the means of sending my man to jail on two occasions—and now, I guess, it's my turn to even things up."

Before anybody in the room could divine the exact meaning of her words, she whipped a revolver from her bedraggled garments, and fired point blank at Goodrich.

"Take that!" she screamed, with diabolical fury.

"It will put you past doing any one else any harm."

Following the first shot came another, and still another. The little justice fell flat on his face.

The marshal got under the table.

Goodrich seemed to reel back.

The apartment was full of smoke.

Gault darted forward.

There was a rush of feet from the apartment in which the coroner and his jury were sitting.

All was confusion and alarm—and amid the rush of steps, cries and powder-smoke, somebody outside had lifted the sash of the window.

And as agilely as an acrobat "Mary Harrity," discarding her bedraggled gown and hat, sprang through the opening.

She was caught in the arms of a man who was waiting outside, and who broke her fall.

"Run for all you are worth!" said this individual.

"I'll keep them at bay till you get into safety!"

The person who had caught the woman in his arms was a very tall, athletic-looking man, with a sinister visage and unusually broad shoulders and long arms.

"Run!" cried this fellow.

"Run for your life!"

"The wagon's waiting in the lane."

The man described was Bill Beatty, the captain of a gang of the most desperate ruffians on Long Island.

CHAPTER IX.

WEAPONS THAT WOULDN'T WORK.

GIDEON GAULT, when he got to the window of the room, was met by two six-shooters aimed with steady hand at his head.

"Now look a-here, Mr. Gault," said Bill Beatty, coolly, "better get back into that room or I'll make a lead mine of you."

"Do ye hear me?"

Gault, strangely enough, was taken at a disadvantage; he had not even a weapon on him.

He had left his revolvers in the holsters of his saddle.

What could he do?

He knew the man Beatty to be one of the most cool and cold-blooded ruffians in the country; and he knew also that Beatty was a deadshot, and would not hesitate for a moment in carrying out his threat.

However brave an unarmed man is, he is always placed at a disadvantage when another equally nervy man has the bulge on him, so to speak.

Beatty, by way of emphasizing his threat, fired three shots in rapid succession, and the men who had come into the room ran back again like a flock of frightened sheep.

In the smoke and confusion incident to the shooting, Beatty, with a few bounds, ran to where Gault had secured his mount, and springing into the saddle was off like the wind before anybody could start in pursuit.

They could hear his mocking laugh as he rode furiously up the road.

Gault was mad with anger.

Goodrich had received a very slight wound from the first shot.

Still it was a wound that, for the moment, had stunned him.

Mary Harrity's bullet had glanced along his skull, removing a little of scalp and hair as it plowed its way through his hat.

The force and suddenness of the shot had keeled him over.

The blood trickled down his face, and Gault for the instant thought he was fatally hurt.

THE MISSING HEAD MYSTERY.

The detective secured Goodrich's pistols, however, and leaping to the ground from the open window, he got into the turnpike in a trice, then at the top of his speed started off in hot pursuit of Beatty.

He saw the direction in which the crook had gone, and put out for the lane like the wind.

When he got to the mouth of the lane he heard the distant rumble of wagon wheels, and concluded that that was the vehicle which Bill Beatty had alluded to, after catching the woman in his arms.

Nellie Remsen, it appeared, beneath her wet and muddy dress, had on a male suit, which might have been made for a boy of sixteen or seventeen years—and so in discarding her skirt she had nothing to retard her flight.

Gault stopped for a moment when he got to the mouth of the lane.

He heard, beside the rumble of the wheels of the vehicle, the tramp of horse's feet.

Then he knew that Beatty had gone down the lane likewise.

It did not take him an instant to decide what to do.

He took another fresh spurt, and went down the lane at a ten miles gait.

He was likewise aware, from the sounds that floated to him, that Beatty had slackened his speed—and was now going at a pleasant canter.

"I'll teach you a lesson you'll not be apt to forget, Mr. William Beatty," thought the detective, as he continued his course without abating his speed a jot.

"I'll teach you, once I clap eyes on you, that it's dangerous work stealing another man's horse."

He had proceeded about four hundred yards down the lane, when he caught sight of the horseman.

Beatty was nearly a hundred and fifty yards in advance.

The wagon, or whatever other vehicle it was, had disappeared.

Not even the rumble of its wheels could any longer be heard.

"Now for it," said Gault, breathing hard from the terrific pace at which he had gone. "I'll wing you, my man, if there's any virtue in Goodrich's pistols."

He took deliberate aim with one of Goodrich's revolvers, and pressed the trigger.

The weapon did not come up to his expectations.

It merely snapped.

There was no discharge.

Once more Gault pressed the trigger, with a similar result.

A harmless snap!

But this, with Gault's angry exclamation, warned Mr. Beatty that there was some one behind, endeavoring to "pot" him.

The moment he caught sight of Gault he drew a revolver and crack! went a bullet. It whistled past the detective's head.

Gault now drew the other revolver, and taking aim, with set teeth once more pressed the trigger.

Still the same result.

"Curse the luck!" he growled.

"What kind of weapons does Goodrich carry, anyhow?"

He soon found that both revolvers were, for firing purposes, as useless as wooden guns.

With another shot and a mocking laugh Beatty pressed his knees into the horse's sides and shot forward like a catapult.

It was plain to the detective now that Bill Beatty could have shot him easily enough, had he the mind to do so.

But it was plain that the captain of the crooks had no such intention from the start.

Now this occurred to Gault:

Was it possible that Beatty knew Goodrich's weapons were useless, or had been rendered so by somebody tampering with them?

The detective, after a moment's thought, dismissed this idea from his mind at once.

It was not likely that anything of the sort could have happened.

"It's no use going any farther," reflected Gault, disconsolately.

"I might as well chase the wind as that fellow.

"All the advantages for the present are on his side—speed, weapons, everything else."

It occurred to the detective that he might look at Goodrich's revolvers and discover what was the matter with them.

He soon ascertained the true cause of the weapons not firing.

There was not a shell in a single chamber of either of them.

"Hum, that explains it," said Gault to himself.

"Somebody's played my friend Goodrich very neatly—extracted every bullet."

"It's strange that I didn't think of looking at the confounded things before."

"Faugh! what a sheer waste of time, and—froth," he added with disgust.

When he had got once more into the highway, Gault had tolerably cooled down.

He was inclined to make merry over the adventure.

"I hope and trust poor Goodrich isn't hurt badly," he said to himself.

"I don't care much for the loss of a horse and two good weapons, but one cannot always replace a friend."

He went on a little farther, and this thought occurred to him:

"Bill Beatty has had a hand in the murder of Andrew Moffat, that's plain."

"As for the woman, Nellie Remsen—she has had some part in it, too."

"Who'd ever have thought that she had a boy's suit under that old bedraggled gown of hers?"

"She, in a way, fooled us all."

"Wanted to be committed to the workhouse! That wasn't half bad on Nellie Remsen's part."

"Then her cock-and-bull story about the six men, a word of which I didn't believe—that was good in a way, too."

"Yes, she had a hand in the old miser's death."

"I shouldn't be surprised if she was the one on watch under the hedge where I found the cigar butt and the matches, and the impatient digging of the high booteheels in the loam."

"But no; again I'm wrong; the boot was too long for a woman's—I must find some other explanation—and the right one to fasten it on to."

Then Gault continued to reason the matter further.

"Yes," he pursued, "the larger of the two impressions has been made by Beatty."

"There's no doubt about it—not the slightest doubt about it."

"Well, Mr. Beatty, after all's said and done, I fancy Gideon Gault can get even with you."

"You are a big fool, Mister Beatty, not to lay low while you had the chance."

Then arose before Gault's mental vision another character in the fearful drama which had been enacted the night before.

This was the Moffatsville clerk, Willis Hearn.

"Should like to have a look at your feet, Mr. Hearn," commanded the detective.

"I shouldn't be surprised if I found that your footgear made the smaller impressions under the window of the old house—and those imprints also in the rear."

"Well, I must make it a point to call on you, see you, then judge."

"You may be innocent, but I don't think you are, according to my judging."

Gault had not gone down the road more than fifty paces when he met Goodrich, Mr. Herold and several others coming to meet him; among the rest the coroner and the marshal.

It lifted a great load from Gault's heart when he saw Goodrich coming up unhurt and almost smiling.

"By Jove!" said the detective as he clasped Goodrich's hand. "This almost makes amends for my poor success."

"I thought that that brazen hussy had winged you, sure."

CHAPTER X.

RETROSPECTION.

FOR a little while we shall leave our two detectives and introduce the reader to another scene.

In the heart of a wood near B—, a distance of about half a dozen miles from Moffatsville, and within half a mile or so of the ocean, stood an old house in a half ruinous condition.

It is unnecessary further to describe it, save to say that some years before the opening of this story it had been occupied by a Southern gentleman, who, after the civil war, had come East to retrieve his fallen fortunes.

He partially succeeded, by dealing in stocks and bonds on Wall and Broad streets.

The last that was seen of the Southerner was when he bade his friends adieu and made his first and last ocean voyage.

The "liner" never reached its destined port.

And, when nothing was heard of it for several weeks, it was reported to have struck an iceberg, sinking with all on board.

Not a soul was saved!

So the memory of the Southern gentleman soon became past history, even among his friends.

The old house near the sea and in the heart of the woods, was likewise forgotten.

Let the reader go back with us a few days previous to the opening of this story.

It is night.

The hour about ten o'clock.

From the direction of Moffatsville a light wagon, to which is harnessed a powerful-looking horse, is driven along the country lane (before described by us), and which branches from the highroad (which passes by Andrew Moffat's, as also described), and continues its course till the driver pulls up at the piece of woods alluded to.

There are three men in the wagon besides the driver.

When they come to the edge of the timber the three men alight from the vehicle, and the tallest man says, addressing the Jehu:

"You may go back now, Rickard."

"We mean to foot the remainder of the distance, and take no chances."

"All right," said the man whom he had called Rickard.

"When will you need me again?"

"Some night during the week."

"But you shall hear from me before then," explained the tall man, who was no other than Bill Beatty.

"But, anyhow, hold yourself ready for the first call."

"When the time's ripe I'll send Ben Remsen, so you'll not be taken unawares."

"It's just as well to give ample warning and plenty of time."

"Very good, cap," said Rickard.

"And now I suppose I can go to Moffatsville?"

"Yes, and put up there till you hear from me," replied Beatty.

"Don't forget it will be Ben Remsen who will bring the message."

"Yes; you will know me when you see me again, won't you, Rickard?" said the shortest and less stalwart of the three, with an unpleasant laugh—unpleasant because it grated disagreeably on the ear.

"Yes, I guess I shall," was the dry reply of Rickard.

"Nobody who ever saw you before would be likely to forget you; I'll bet on that."

"Ah, ha, ha!" roared the three men in concert.

Then from Beatty:

"He has you down fine, Ben."

"Not on the score of good looks, I'll swear," said the third of the party.

"Ben wouldn't take first prize at a beauty show, I'll take my oath."

"Well, gentlemen, good-night," said the driver, and, with a sharp crack or two of his whip, away the vehicle rolled, until it disappeared in a turning of the lane.

"I don't like the looks of that fellow. Can he be trusted?" said the man called Ben Remsen.

"What's the matter with his looks?" demanded the second man, with a hoarse guffaw.

"He's another who wouldn't take a prize in a beauty show—ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up!" exclaimed Remsen, savagely.

"That's another cut at me."

"How about your own pretty mug in a beauty show?"

"I'll swear you'd smash a mirror by looking at it."

"Why?" asked the other, laughing.

"Why?"

"Because it couldn't stand the insult by having a fellow like you gazing at it."

"Oh! ho! ho! And you call that smart, do you?" said the second man.

"You ought to hire yourself out to a dime museum or a minstrel show; you'd be as good as a gold mine to them."

"I'd advise you gents to keep quiet," here interrupted Beatty.

"You growl and quarrel like a pair of old women or children."

"Come, let us get to the house."

"The boys will be waiting for us, and I feel like eating something."

"And so do I, by Jove!" chimed in Remsen.

"My ribs are going together from sheer dint of starvation."

"That's the ride in the air you're not used to," replied Beatty, laughing.

"A man lacking an appetite should come here, and he wouldn't be a month before he could chaw a bullock."

"That is somewhat of an exaggeration," interjected the second man.

"But blow me tight if it wouldn't give a consumptive an appetite."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SOUTHERNER'S MANSION IN THE WOOD.

BILL BEATTY and his companions moved off now by a bridle path through the timber.

"I could take you by the road," he hastened to explain; "but this is a much nearer route."

"Is the place very old?" asked Remsen.

"As old as the hills," laughed Beatty, in reply.

"That is, I don't know how old it is."

"It was built a long while before the Revolution, that is certain."

"However, the man who last owned it went to sea, and he never came back."

"How was that?"

"Was he a bank president?" asked the second man, Nellis by name.

"No, not even a cashier," chuckled Bill, hoarsely.

"It appears, though," he pursued after a pause, "that his name was Barrison, and was at one time a great slave owner in the South, fabulously wealthy, but got broke by President Lincoln's proclamation giving freedom to the niggers."

"Mighty hard lines on Barrison," interjected Remsen.

"Then I suppose he flew the coop and came East?"

"That's just what he did."

"Then with what little cash he had left he went into speculation on Wall Street."

"And bought this old house?"

"Exactly."

"Then he took a voyage to Europe, that is about the usual caper?"

"Right again."

"But fate ordained that the ship should founder in mid-ocean, which was the last that was heard of Mr. Barrison."

"Had he no relations to succeed to his property?" asked Nellis, whose interest was aroused by Beatty's account.

"No, not that I ever heard of."

"If he had they'd have come on to claim the property as a matter of course."

"As no one turned up, and as nobody seemed to have taken any interest in Barrison or his fate, the house had gone to almost absolute ruin, when I one day by accident discovered it and at once took possession."

"But here we are at Barrison Hall, as it was once called."

Yes, there fronting them was a structure of enormous size, irregularly built and of one story.

It looked as though it might have covered an acre and a half of ground at the very least.

There had been a shrubbery at the back very extensive, but which was now overrun with weeds, vines and thick, almost impenetrable masses of undergrowth.

Taken all in all, it was a dreary, uncanny place even in daylight.

"That is a revelation," said Remsen.

"I didn't imagine, not even from your own account, that it was one fifth as large."

"Whoever designed it was an ass."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he didn't know the first thing of the laws of architecture."

"Well, it suits my purpose."

"That is all I care about," replied Bill.

"You couldn't have chosen a safer rendezvous in this country," chimed in Nellis, enthusiastically.

"I'm quite taken with it."

"I don't see why you shouldn't have from forty to fifty of the boys here."

"Splendid place for half a dozen counterfeiting rigs."

"Yes," added Remsen, "and a safe hiding place for anybody who wanted to lie low for awhile."

"Having seen all this, I'm with you in the scheme you proposed in Brooklyn, cap."

"And count me in, too," Nellis interjected.

"Though, by Jove! I don't understand the very first thing of the graft a yet."

"Do you, Remsen?"

"No; no more than yourself."

"I wish I did."

"Well, boys, I don't quite understand the whole thing myself."

"You see, it's a game between that young dude, Willis Hearn, and our particular friend, Tom Endicott."

"It appears that Endicott in his cups one night half disclosed a plan that Hearn had to rob a very rich old miser in this direction—in which Tom was to join, and get his share of the boodle."

"That's as far as I got."

"He suddenly became mum—Tom, I mean—and wouldn't say another word for love nor money."

"But I mean getting onto the graft before two nights are past, and the moment I do you can bet that the money is mine—and yours, too, if you but help me out in the scheme."

"And now," added he, "let's get into the house."

"How?"

"Front or rear?"

"I see no light in any of the windows," said Nellis.

"We'll find everything right in the rear," was Beatty's answer.

"Some of the boys'll be there, anyhow—and, if we can't have nothing else, we can have a bite to eat."

"After that, and a bottle or so, we can formulate our plans."

"This miser is said to be worth about three hundred thousand dollars—and, what is more to the point, he never banks."

"Wise man he," chuckled Nellis.

"Bank presidents and cashiers have a bad habit of running away with the cash of their depositors."

"That's the reason he doesn't bank," put in Bill.

"Although it occurs to me," he added significantly, "that it would be better for him in the end."

"But whatever Tom Endicott gets, I'm determined that Willis Hearn shall not reap benefit by this particular miser."

And laughingly the three men went to the rear of the old Hall.

From one of the windows in the left wing of the building a glimmer of light shot out into the darkness.

"It is as I expected; some of the boys are at home," said Beatty.

"Here, I will signal them."

And he did by giving three shrill whistles, with an interval of a few seconds between each note.

They had not long to wait after that.

The glimmer of light moved from the window, and soon they heard a shuffling of steps as though over a stone floor.

Then a door was cautiously opened.

"Well," said a hoarse voice, as though the questioner had a very bad cold, "who is it?"

"All right, Raymond."

And Beatty and his companions approached the partly-opened door.

"You, captain?" interrogated the owner of the hoarse voice.

"Yes—and two friends," Bill Beatty replied.

Then, without more ado, the door was opened wide and the three men entered.

The man who had opened the door had a lighted lamp—the same as illuminated the window in the left wing.

As Remsen and Nellis had surmised from the shuffling steps, the floor of the passage was of stone, and bare of either matting or carpet.

The man who had let them in was old, rough-looking and wrinkled.

He wore an habitual scowl.

It was a face replete with cruelty, villainy and cunning, and add to this he was villainously cross-eyed—a human ogre, if there ever was one.

"Any of the boys at home?" asked Beatty.

"No one but myself," was Raymond's hoarse and growling reply, "and I don't expect any, either, before to-morrow."

"Two fresh members?" interrogatively from the ogre, as he glared with his cross eyes at Nellis and Remsen.

"Yes, new members, Raymond—but old and tried friends."

"We are precious hungry after our drive!"

"Anything to eat?"

This was fired at the old fellow in almost a breath.

"Yes, plenty—and lots to drink, besides," came back the hoarse voice of Raymond.

"Now, gents, be good enough to follow me, and mind your steps, as this flooring is not of the very newest.

"The whole shebang is not much better than an old rat-trap, anyway."

And with this adjuration Raymond led the trio along a somewhat zigzag passage to the apartment from which they had first seen the glimmering light.

"You will find everything comfortable in here," he declared in his growling voice, which at times took a different inflection, and sounded like a cracked bassoon.

"So just you two gents"—to Nellis and Remsen—"make yourselves at home till I round you up some refreshment."

Then, lighting a second lamp which he took with him, he left the room.

It did not take Raymond long in "rounding up refreshments" as he termed it.

In less than twenty minutes he had a substantial meal spread before them, flanked by three generous bottles of St. Julien.

"Now, gents," said the old man, "you may talk as long as you please.

"As for myself, I'm going to bed.

"At my time of life late hours and me do not agree, and that's a bit of rhyme without intending it.

"Good night!"

"Good night!" they returned in answer to Raymond's salutation.

When the old man was gone the three men set to work, and very soon put away what was on the table.

The wine came in very nicely.

So did the cigars which the old ogre brought.

Then the discussion about the miser's wealth was started anew, and the desire to possess it grew as the moments sped.

"I'll tell you what it is," said Beatty, now feeling jolly and comfortable.

"It's as easy getting that old chap's money as rolling off a log."

"Where do you leave Hearn?" put in Nellis.

"Hearn isn't in it!" interjected Ben Remsen contemptuously.

"Do you fancy for a moment a dude like Hearn will cut any ice—where better men are concerned?" he quickly and pointedly added.

"Where do you leave the captain or myself, or even my wife? She must have a hand in this graft, too, or I'm out of it.

"The only two men I fear, and they get a drop onto most things, is that man Gideon Gault and that duffer Goodrich.

"As to Goodrich, I'll cut his throat if I ever get the chance."

"That reminds me," said Beatty, "I've seen Goodrich nosing about Moffattsburg on several occasions.

"I don't know what's brought him there, but if he interferes in any of my plans he'd better look out for himself."

That night the three crooks decided that they should go to Brooklyn next day, and await developments as to Tom Endicott's knowledge of who the man was whom he and Willis Hearn were going to deprive of his hoarded wealth.

Later they retired.

Next day they went to Brooklyn, according to programme.

CHAPTER XII.

EXPLANATORY.

EARLY in the afternoon of the opening of the present story, two men almost ran into each other's arms at the corner of Court Street and Atlantic Avenue.

The two men were our old friends, Gideon Gault and Silas Goodrich.

"Well," said Gault, "what news?"

"We have been keeping a sharp lookout at Dacre's, but I don't think our man is there—though you say you saw him enter the place."

"That he did—and I'll swear he never came out while I was there," replied Gault.

"Well, we searched every room and couldn't find a trace of him."

"He must have got out by the back and scaled the fence in the yard."

"That is not improbable," said Gault.

"But my opinion is that he is still somewhere in the house."

"Do you know that the crooks have utilized an old sewer running up from South Ferry?" said Silas.

"Many years ago that was done," Gault replied.

"But the sewer you refer to has been filled up long ago."

"The work was given to a contractor.

"But query—did he do his work?"

"The contractor has the reputation of being the most honest in Brooklyn."

"But there were sub-contractors under, who would have no scruples in cheating the city," said Goodrich.

"I think if we were to investigate we might discover a few secrets in connection with the work supposed to have been done—and which I really and truly believe was not—by a considerable number of points."

"Well, Dacre pretends to be in entire ignorance of Tom Endicott's whereabouts, does he?"

"That's what he does."

"This fellow, Dacre, also pretends to have reformed."

"So he says, and so it's reported," Goodrich answered.

"I wouldn't believe Tom Dacre on his oath," said Gault, with emphasis.

"These so-called reformations are all a sham."

"That's my opinion."

"Once a criminal always a criminal."

"I beg to differ with you there, Silas."

"There are rare cases where the man has honestly reformed—and has done good work, too."

"I'll cite one instance, the late Jerry McAuley."

"Granted, but I don't think you can point to another," replied Silas, deliberately.

"And I question very much whether McAuley would be good as he was if it didn't pay him."

By this it could be pretty plainly seen that Goodrich didn't believe in the reformation of criminals.

Gault didn't want to discuss the question, and proceeded with:

"Whom do you think I saw to-day?"

"Who?"

"Bill Beatty."

"One of the smartest rogues on Long Island!" exclaimed Goodrich.

"It's a blanked shame that we couldn't gather him in!"

"But we haven't even an indictment against him."

"We may not be long so."

"I hear that he is the chief of a gang, somewhere about Moffattsburg—and as you have observed yourself it is seldom we see him nowadays."

"No, that is true."

"But how do you come to discover that he has extended his operations to Moffattsburg?"

"One would fancy that he wouldn't make much of a thing of it out there."

"That would be the natural conclusion," replied Gault.

"Still I hear it is out there—somewhere—and that many of the burglaries and hold-ups that have occurred there recently may be traced to him."

"They say he has a rendezvous somewhere in the woods."

"But looking for him would be just as difficult as searching for a needle in a hayrick."

"He is one of the slipperiest rascals in the business."

While they stood talking Dolan came up.

The readers of other numbers of the Gault Series will of course not forget our old acquaintance Dolan.

He, among others, had been set to watch Tom Dacre's.

Tom Dacre was a noted ex-convict.

He was supposed to have reformed, and kept a saloon on Atlantic Avenue.

"Well," said Gault to Dolan "what's the good word?"

"Tom Endicott has escaped."

"How do you know?"

"We have searched every hole and corner in Dacre's over and over again."

"He's not there, that's certain."

"Then he must have got out by the rear, as I've said," came from Goodrich.

"Or by the sewer," interjected Gault.

Dolan laughed.

"The sewer is filled up long ago," he rejoined.

"Goodrich says he has good reasons to think that it is not."

"Well, I'm not going to swear that Mr. Goodrich isn't as right as he usually is," pursued Dolan, with something like a sneer in his voice.

"But if he can find a way from Tom Dacre's into the sewer—even anything larger than a rathole—I'll eat my hat, lining and all."

"We sounded the walls at least half a dozen times—went even to the trouble of tearing up the floor, in spite of Dacre's threats to sue for damages—but we could discover no trapdoor, nor anything else.

"We even searched the cellars, with a like result. So there's no two ways about it; the man has gone."

"And you have withdrawn the boys?" said Gault.

"Yes."

"I saw not the slightest use for them to remain."

"Then there's no doubt but Tom Endicott is gone," interpolated Goodrich.

"If he didn't go he'll be gone by this time," said Gault, with a note of displeasure in his voice.

"I have found out one thing, though," interrupted Dolan, triumphantly.

"What?" from both detectives.

"That Mr. Tom Endicott has been having a gay time at old Bunce's with a notorious Bill Beatty."

"Now let me say this—that if we want to collar Endicott, the best place—that is the most likely place—to do it is in the neighborhood of Moffatsville."

Gault and Goodrich glanced meaningfully at each other.

They had almost been discussing the very same question.

"Another thing," pursued Dolan; "I have discovered—and mind you this is no bugbear—that Mr. Beatty has his eyes on a very wealthy miser somewhere in the neighborhood of Moffatsville, whom he intends to rob with others of his gang."

"What's the man's name?" Gault casually asked.

He knew of one very rich miser in that direction.

His name was Andrew Moffat.

And he further knew that old Mr. Moffat would be a very easy mark for rascals of the Bill Beatty type.

As he had said subsequently to the magistrate, Mr. Herold, that he had had occasion to warn Andrew Moffat before, as to his keeping so enormous an amount of money in the house, instead of banking it.

But the miser merely chuckled, and in a few words intimated the detective to mind his own affairs—and that when he wanted his advice he would ask him for it.

This was all the thanks Gideon Gault got for his kind, even thoughtful, offices.

"Do you know this miser's name?" now put in Goodrich, taking the words, so to speak, out of Gault's mouth.

"No, I do not."

"Does he live in the town?"

"That I don't know either."

Gault smiled and let Goodrich continue.

"Then you don't know very much about it, it seems. Who told you?"

"That's my business," from Dolan, gruffly, and with an air of far from being pleased.

Then to Gault:

"I would advise you to take the tip I have given you."

"As to whom—the miser, Endicott or Beatty?"

"As to the whole trio. I have heard further than what I have already told you."

"Well?"

"That Bill Beatty has his headquarters about six or seven miles from Moffatsville."

"And that information is genuine," ended Dolan.

"Are you sure?" from Gault.

"I've got it from a positive source. And now duty calls me away."

"I must leave you and put for headquarters."

"You're in a mighty great hurry," said Gideon, laughing.

"Yes, in the present case. I've been sent posthaste for the chief."

And away Dolan went.

He walked rapidly up Court Street, nodding right and left to several acquaintances whom he met.

"Queer fellow," said Goodrich, looking after him.

"Yes, queer enough; but with a heart as big as an ox," exclaimed Gault.

"He doesn't like me worth a cent."

There was something like regret in Goodrich's voice.

"And you don't like him."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Long Island detective.

"There you're wrong."

"I do like him—and can't help it, and I sometimes think that's where I show a decided weakness."

"I don't think anybody could help but like Dolan, and admire him, too, for his manly frankness."

"But he doesn't like me, I can see that plain enough."

"Well, we'll dismiss all that for the present," said Gault.

"You are with me in this case, heart and soul, I know."

"Yes."

"Then I want you to set out for Moffatsville as soon as you can make preparations, and try and find out all you can about this Beatty—where this rendezvous is, and the number of men he has, etc."

"I shall be there myself early to-morrow morning at the latest."

"Then I'll start at once?" said Goodrich.

"Start as soon as you can"—from Gault.

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW GOODRICH'S WEAPONS CAME TO BE TAMPERED WITH.

THAT same night Goodrich found himself in Moffatsville.

Though his name was well known among the townsfolk there, personally he was a stranger.

He started in with pushing his inquiries about Bill Beatty.

At the principal tavern of the town no one had heard of the man.

Yes, there were hold-ups and burglaries committed in plenty.

But all of these were attributed to New York crooks.

He could get very little satisfaction in the town.

All his inquiries amounted to nothing.

It appeared to him that Moffatsville was a very slow place indeed.

Maybe he pushed his investigations with a little too much caution.

However this may be he left the town in disgust, and resolved to go on a still hunt and find all he could from the isolated cottagers and farmers as to whether such a band of desperadoes existed, or whether it was a mere figment of the imagination.

One thing he did succeed in discovering, and that was who the rich miser was.

Bill Beatty, he had heard in Brooklyn, was somewhere near the seaside, about six or seven miles from Moffatsville.

He had also heard that the desperadoes' rendezvous was in the heart of a wood, one of the most unfrequented parts of Long Island.

He got outside the town and chose the first country lane to his right and went down it.

The night was very bleak and dreary as we have already described.

Silas Goodrich looked up at the sky.

It was as black as Erebus.

Great banks of clouds covered the entire dome, and there was not the glimmer of a light anywhere, if we except the distant lights of the town.

Goodrich did not profess to be much of a wiseacre, as to being the predictor of weather changes.

But he could make no mistake as to the then aspect of the sky.

It, though not a puff of wind blew, was ominous and threatening.

"Ten to one but I'll get a drenching before I reach any point of shelter," he thought to himself.

"But I may have something far worse to deal with—the thieves themselves."

So, getting under a hedge, he took out his weapons, and, by the light of a few matches, carefully examined them.

They were all right.

So, in that respect, the detective felt his mind at ease.

Then he went on again.

He had to pick his steps in that dark and dreary lane, so his progress was necessarily slow.

There were deep and treacherous ruts and holes in the road, which apparently had never felt the improving touch of man.

The turnpike to Moffatsville was all right.

The lane branching from the turnpike was all wrong.

But on Goodrich went, not at all dismayed by the difficulties of the work he had cut out for himself.

He had gone about three quarters of a mile down the lane, when he thought he heard the sound of footfalls, some distance behind—coming evidently from the highway.

He stopped to make sure.

His ears had not deceived him, for presently the sound of steps came more distinct.

The detective got under an old tree, which grew on one side of the lane.

Here he waited.

More distinctly rang the footsteps.

He kept his eyes fixed on a turning some fifty or sixty yards from him.

He saw a light.

It shone like a little star at first, not as bright, but with a lurid, uncertain glow.

“Some countryman with a lantern,” he thought.

As the steps neared him the light grew more and more luminous.

Finally it resolved itself into a dazzling yellow glare, lighting up the person who carried it most distinctly.

Goodrich saw the burly form of a man—a farmer-looking fellow, with a bluff, ruddy face, mustache and beard.

He appeared to be of middle age.

The newcomer was within less than a dozen yards of him now, and Goodrich coughed slightly to attract attention.

He naturally reflected that if he sprang suddenly out into the lane, the stranger might take to his heels and run away.

However, in this he would have been mistaken, for the newcomer was plainly made of sterner stuff.

“Hello! Who the d—l are you?” burst forth from a gruff, strong voice, which seemed to come up from the man's boots.

Goodrich stepped into the middle of the lane.

The stranger didn't hesitate for an instant, but came on. He held the lantern up and scanned Goodrich's face.

The examination appeared to satisfy him.

“A stranger about here, I reckon,” he said in a matter of fact voice.

“Lost your way?”

“It does seem like it, indeed,” responded Goodrich, laughing.

“I came on here from Moffatsville and was making for the seashore.

“It strikes me I've got mixed up somehow.”

It was the stranger's turn now to laugh.

And the loud “haw! haw! haw!” was so cheerful and good-humored that the detective “cottoned” to the man at once.

“Are you from Moffatsville?” asked Silas, by way of saying something.

“Naw.”

“Then you're a countryman?”

“That's what I am, stranger.

“I was born and reared in these parts.”

“He seems to be frank, anyhow,” thought Silas.

Then he added aloud:

“You're a farmer—am I right?”

“You've struck the nail on the head that time, friend. That's what I am, surely.

“But times be so precious bad that I'd like to be anything else,” he added, taking out an old cutty pipe from his pocket and lighting it.

Puff—puff!

“So you want to get to the seaside?” said the farmer.

“Yes.”

“And you reckon you've lost your way?”

“That's what I was just thinking,” replied Goodrich, and he took out a pipe too and lighted it.

“You're not a country chap, I see that?”

“No.”

“Then you're a city man?”

“Yes.”

“New York?”

“No, Brooklyn.”

“Hum; fine city Brooklyn?”

“Yes.”

“Was never there, stranger.”

“No?”

“No.”

“I should like to go, though, some time and see what sort of a place it is.

“When I send my ‘truck’ I send one of my men with it.

“Of course he goes to market, disposes of the produce and brings back the money.

“That's all I care about.”

“Being rather a timid man, I shouldn't like to have his job,” said Silas, parenthetically.

“You don't look to be very timid, neighbor.”

And the farmer inspected him from head to foot.

“One cannot always go by looks,” said Silas.

“I'm strong enough, in all conscience, but I'm not used

to country roads—especially when the night is dark and threatening a storm.”

“The storm won't come on before midnight,” observed the farmer, scanning the black clouds overhead.

“I'm as good as a weather glass, I am, when a storm's threatening, and I never missed my point by more'n an hour at any time.”

“You're an exception,” said Goodrich simply.

They were walking along side by side, of course, by this time.

“You said you wouldn't like to have my man's job, stranger?” interjected the farmer.

“No more I wouldn't.”

“Why?”

“Because in the first place I'd be afraid of being robbed.”

“That is, on your return from market with the boodle?”

“Yes, precisely.”

“I don't blame you for that, neighbor.”

“It did happen once to Mike.”

“Who is Mike?”

“My man—him I sends to market with the truck.”

“And so they held him up?”

“Yes, stranger.”

“What did Mike do?”

“What would you think?”

“I'm sure I don't know.”

“Perhaps he fired his pistol at them and scared the robbers away.”

The farmer laughed very heartily.

“No; he didn't do that, neighbor.”

“Then he must have been a coward?” said Goodrich, to humor him.

“Not a bit of it.”

“Then why didn't he let drive with his weapon?”

“Because he hadn't one—that's the why, stranger.”

“He hadn't as much as a pop-gun.”

“Then they did rob him, eh?”

“It happened,” said the farmer, “that there was only one robber.

“Mike wouldn't have cared about that much, for he's got the grit of a bulldog.”

“But when it's moonlight, and a feller sees as how he's lookin' into the muzzle of a six-shooter, it somehow takes all the starch outen him.”

“So he gave up the boodle, did he?”—from Goodrich.

“That's jest what he did.”

“But Mike was no dummy, you bet on it.”

“He recalled a little caper played over in Ireland when he was a kid, and he pleaded with the highwayman so hard that he'd lose his place and all the rest of it, that he got him to shoot holes through his hat and coat, jest to show like that he had made a great fight before the boodle was taken.

“The fellow, looking on him as a poor simpleton, fired three shots through his hat and coat.

“Then Mike asked him if he had another shot to fire through the leg of his pants.

“The robber said he had used up his last shot and was sorry he couldn't oblige him.

“That was all Mike wanted to know.

“He flew at Mister Robber like a tiger, knocked him down and kicked him all over the road like a football.”

“Then he took his money back from him and about fifty dollars that the highwayman had.”

“Well,” said Goodrich, “it seems that he had an easy mark.”

“Yes, just about as easy as the present one!”

And, before Goodrich could realize it, he was thrown heavily and in a trice was bound and gagged by three black figures who had sprung upon him, seemingly from the very bowels of the earth.

“I reckon the biter is bit this time,” chuckled the farmer.

“How do you feel now, Mister Detective?

“I hope you liked the story about my man, Mike!” Goodrich next felt a sponge pressed against his nostrils. He was for a moment or two conscious of a pungent odor, then ensued unconsciousness.

When the detective came to he found himself in a hut (apparently a charcoal burner's) in a clump of timber.

His arms were unbound.

The gag had been removed from his mouth.

He was otherwise uninjured.

There was a light burning in the cabin, for it was not yet dawn, and by its aid he saw pinned to the lapel of his coat a scrap of paper on which were some rudely-written characters.

He managed to decipher the following:

"MR. GOODRICH.—You've had a very narrow escape. You did me a favor on an occasion which I could not forget, and through this kind act of yours I prevailed on my friends to give you your liberty without hurting a hair of your head. I have paid my debt, so let me advise you now, as a friend, to clear out and take the first conveyance back to Brooklyn." Your friend,

"THE FARMER."

Goodrich, after reading this precious epistle, got up and stretched himself.

He felt cramped and cold.

The rain had come down on him through some chinks in the roof of the hut; his clothes were wet and chilled him to the bone.

"It's strange," reflected he, as he found his revolvers where he had put them; "they have not even deprived me of my weapons."

If they hadn't, they had at least drawn their teeth, which Gault was to discover later.

"Guess I'll take that fellow's advice," communed Silas, "and clear off, at any rate, to Moffatsville, where I can get a change of linen, underwear and a good breakfast before meeting Gault."

"By Jove!"—after another search of his pockets—"I'm a lucky dog."

"They've not even taken my watch or cash."

"Whatever have I done that I should be treated with so much consideration?"

"I don't recollect having ever seen that farmer-looking man before."

CHAPTER XIV.

VOLUNTARY TESTIMONY.

"I COULD have potted the rascal nicely only your pistols wouldn't work," said Gault, when he and Goodrich had gone back to the miser's house.

"They wouldn't work, eh? What do you mean?" asked Silas.

"Well, when I came to use them I found I could get no more than a snap out of them—they were wholly useless."

"They were loaded all right," said Goodrich, "for I loaded them myself."

"You may have loaded them, but they were subsequently tampered with," Gault declared.

"It puzzled me why they wouldn't go off."

"Then I thought to look at them and ascertain the cause."

"Well?"

"I found that every cartridge had been removed from the chambers."

Here a sudden light dawned in on Silas.

He recalled the attack in the lane, the chloroforming, his return to consciousness later to find himself alone in what appeared to be a charcoal-burner's hut.

"I understand it all now," he exclaimed, then detailed to Gideon what had occurred the night before.

"While I lay unconscious they must have extracted the cartridges from my pistols."

"That makes plain the whole trouble," exclaimed Gault.

"I was lucky to escape as I did," said Silas.

"In truth you were."

"I'd give much to find who that farmer chap is," said Goodrich.

Gault laughed.

"It wouldn't be a matter of surprise if it wasn't our good friend, Beatty," he averred.

"No; it wasn't Bill. I'd know him anywhere, and in any disguise," said Silas.

"He wasn't as tall a man by three inches as Bill Beatty."

"Besides, I never did that rascal a good turn that I know of—and wouldn't if I could."

"But there's no doubt the pretended farmer, whoever he is, saved my life."

"There's the note he left pinned on the lapel of my coat."

"Read it," handing Gault the scribble.

Gault read it over several times, and tried to fix the characters in his mind, to if possible find who had written it.

But in vain.

The writing was unknown to him.

He had never seen anything like it before.

Furthermore, it was evidently not a disguised hand.

"Well," said Silas, "do you know whose it is?"

"That Italian hand," laughed Gideon, "goes beyond me."

"You don't recognize it?"

"Not the first word."

"It is wholly unknown to me."

"Very well, then, I suppose we had better give it up?"

"I suppose we had, seeing we can make nothing out of it," said Gault.

"The band of rascals is more extensive than I thought," Silas remarked after awhile.

"Can it be that there is another gang besides Beatty's?"

"We'll discover that by and by, no doubt," replied Gault.

"Meanwhile let us go and join the coroner and magistrate; we'll see what they are going to do."

The jury had returned a verdict of murder against some person or persons unknown—the usual form in such cases.

"Well, we have arrived at our verdict, Mr. Gault," observed the coroner, as the two detectives entered the room.

"Have you offered a reward for the arrest of the murderers?" asked Silas of the magistrate.

"Oh, that's it!" cried the coroner, with a meaning look.

"Yes, that's the usual thing, I believe," replied Silas—"and the bigger the reward the greater the chance for the arrest of the culprits."

"I'll call a meeting of the townsfolk at once," said Mr. Herold.

"I could offer a reward myself, but it would be slight."

"We'll see what our more prominent citizen'll do about it."

"There ought to be at least a thousand dollars offered in a case of this kind," chimed in the marshal.

"Well, we'll see about that later," replied Mr. Herold—"and about bringing those bloodthirsty ruffians to justice."

"First and foremost the poor old man's head must be found."

"Ouch!"—and the magistrate shivered as if a lump of ice had been put down his back—"it makes my heart freeze when I think of it."

"Oh, the inhuman wretches! to cut a poor old man's head from his body!"

"Did anybody ever hear of such butchery?"

A little later the jury, coroner and magistrate departed.

Mr. Herold was to call a meeting of the townspeople at once, as he expressed it—and he would see that a suitable reward was offered.

Meanwhile the detectives were to push their investigations with all their might.

The marshal and one of the farmers were left to guard the house—each man being well armed for the purpose.

Gault detailed to Goodrich what he had already done.

"What next?" asked Silas.

"I should like to hunt that young fellow, Willis Hearn, up."

"If he has had anything to do with the murder—and it occurs to me that he has had—I had better call on him at the store where he's employed and question him."

"How did you come to know about Hearn?"

"Read that, will you?"

Gault handed Silas the receipt which he had found among the miser's papers.

"H'm!" said Silas, after he had read it.

"An acknowledgment from Willis Hearn to the effect that he had received a loan from Andrew Moffat for seven hundred and fifty dollars."

"That doesn't place Hearn in a very clean position, if all you tell me is true."

"No, indeed, it doesn't."

"But the man may be innocent in spite of my suspicions."

"That's so."

"It's hardly fair to condemn him till you find he's guilty—or, at least, until you're sure of it."

The detectives now took the road to Moffatsville.

As they were about to enter the town a young and well-dressed woman came up.

"Which of you two gentlemen is Mr. Gault?" she inquired eagerly.

Silas pointed to Gideon.

"What can I do for you, madam?" asked the latter, scanning the slightly veiled figure curiously.

"Are you the detective on the Moffat case?" she inquired.

"Yes, I am, madam," replied Gault.

"Can you give me half an hour's private conversation?"

"To what end?"

"I fancy I can clear up the case which you are on," she replied.

"I think I can bring the crime home to the guilty ones."

"Grant me this interview and you won't regret it."

"Out here in the street, madam?" said Gault.

"No," the young woman answered, "at my hotel."

CHAPTER XV.

WILLIS HEARN'S DEADLY ENEMY.

Now there were only two hotels in Moffatsville which could be placed under that category.

In the better one of these two, five minutes later, Gault was holding audience with the mysterious young woman who was to give him a clew to the real culprits in the Moffat murder mystery.

In part, he had made up his mind already as to who the real culprits were.

He might be wrong, he mentally admitted, but he would soon see whether that was so or not.

In the meantime, Silas Goodrich waited for him at a tavern close by.

Gault was surprised at the exceeding loveliness of the woman who now sat before him.

She was barely nineteen years of age, but such a beauty the detective had rarely seen.

Her complexion and eyes were divine.

Her features perfect.

Her teeth pearls, so to speak.

Her mouth faultless, and her hair like strands of fine spun gold, and in such an abundance as to be almost abnormal.

Let the foregoing suffice as a description.

When Gault had got over his surprise at such supreme loveliness, he began:

"Now, madam, I am at your service; pray proceed with your account."

"Have you made any headway in the case up to this?" came from the woman icily.

This question, so coldly put, awoke Gault from his momentary enchantment.

He became the inquisitor at once.

All sentiment was at an end—had died as it had been born.

So much for the tenderness or sweetness of the human voice!

Everything appeared perfect about the woman but her tones.

"Faugh!" Gault thought, "what a fool I am!"

The illusion was destroyed—strangled, in short.

"As to that, madam, it is too early to hazard an opinion," was his cold reply.

"Besides, I am here to learn what you have to say about it."

"True"—still icily—"I am here to be questioned, not to question."

"That's what I understand"—from Gault, carelessly.

"Then I shall tell my story as briefly as I can.

"One of the assassins of Mr. Moffat, and the chief one, is a young clerk of this town."

Gault started in his chair.

He had Willis Hearn in mind as she spoke.

If the detective had any doubts in that respect they were dispelled by the woman's next words.

"The name of the clerk is Willis Hearn!" she snapped out.

"How have you arrived at that conclusion?" asked Gault, quietly.

"Because I knew he was going to commit the crime two months ago," she answered.

"The murder?"

"No, the robbery which culminated in murder. It was not his intention, at first, to kill the old man," the woman declared, "but he brought himself to it by degrees."

"How did you come to know of it?"

"That I can explain easily.

"He made me his confidante."

The young woman absolutely hissed the words out.

"To betray him?" put in the detective, with a scornful curl of the lip.

This beautiful creature was absolutely hideous to him now.

"Oh, no; Willis Hearn is not such a fool"—laughing bitterly.

"If he knew that I but contemplated such a thing, he would have cut my throat before this."

"Besides, he was in his cups when he told me—drunk, you know!" she added.

"Where did this occur?"

"New York."

"Why did you not speak of this before?"

"I had a purpose to serve."

"Might I ask what the nature of it was?" questioned Gault, regarding the young woman with disgust.

He detested the spy and informer in any guise.

The young woman, not the least bit abashed, replied:

"Revenge! I have been awaiting this moment for three years."

"He has injured you?"

The girl laughed scornfully.

"Personally?" she asked of him.

"Yes."

"Oh, no, indeed," laughing sarcastically; "I have taken good care of that."

"I never gave Willis Hearn the chance."

"You have not been in love with the man, then?"

A scornful curl of her beautiful lips was the only response.

Gault repeated his question.

"Never!"

This came out through her set teeth as did a former answer.

"Well, what have you against the man?"

"Do you want to know?" she almost screamed, with blazing eyes.

"Yes, I should very much like to know," replied Gault, coolly.

"People rarely go to such awful extremes without having some object."

"How has he aroused your wrath against him?"

Then with a little further urging and amid a torrent of bitter tears (for she was fairly melted now), the young woman told a pitiful story of betrayal—the betrayal of her only sister, in San Francisco, by Hearn.

"Is your sister still alive?" the detective asked, in a more kindly tone than he had yet used.

At this question the floodgates of her grief opened afresh.

The woman sobbed bitterly.

From which Gault augured that her sister was dead, and which he was assured of later when the young woman grew more composed.

"Then you are certain that Hearn had a hand in Mr. Moffat's death?"

"As certain as I am that you are sitting there this moment."

"Besides, he was in the old gentleman's debt."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me."

"Did he mention any specific amount?"

"Yes."

"What was it? Do you recollect?"

"Certainly, Seven hundred and fifty dollars."

That was the exact sum, as on the receipt, to a dollar. But Gault made no allusion to the written document which he had found among the miser's papers.

"Who do you think was connected with him in the murder and robbery of Mr. Moffat?"

This was the detective's next question.

"I can tell you if you want to know," said the young woman.

"I do want to know," averred Gault, decisively.

"I hate to harm a man toward whom I hold no ill will," replied the woman, hesitatingly.

"If you decline to tell, your information with regard to Willis Hearn will be of no use," returned Gault, to urge her on.

This was not so.

But, knowing no better, she blurted out very reluctantly:

"Is it necessary that I should tell this man's name?"

"Yes, absolutely," from the detective.

"Then I suppose I must tell all—bring another into it as well as Hearn?"

"That will be your only plan," quietly from Gault.

"Then his name is Thomas Endicott."

"Tom Endicott?" came from the detective's lips, with a startled cry.

"Then he did get away from Dacre's! He did come out here!"

"You know him, then?" said the young woman, looking squarely into Gault's eyes.

"Slightly—only slightly," replied the detective, assuming an unruffled look, as though the matter was of no consequence one way or other.

"I met him in the course of my professional career once or twice, maybe thrice—but I won't be sure."

"And so Tom Endicott was in the swim," more to himself than to the woman.

"Those were the imprints of his feet under the hedge—narrow like a woman's, but much longer."

"Yes, Tom was on the watch, smoking a cigar, while Bill and this young whipper snapper (who is plainly a bad egg) were doing the act in the miser's house."

"I see it all now!"

"But whose blood was that in the road, near where Tom Endicott stood?"

"I shouldn't wonder if the other two rascals didn't do for Tom to get him out of the way and get his share of the plunder."

"Honesty among thieves, eh? Yes; a lot of it!"

Much of this Gault did not express aloud, but to himself.

But his lips moved, though no words came from them, and the woman watched his features narrowly.

"Is that all?" he said, at last.

"That is all," she replied.

"Don't you think it enough?"

"Yes," half-absently.

"Did you ever hear of a man by the name of Beatty—Bill Beatty?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"A friend of Hearn's or Endicott's?"

With regard to Hearn this was mere guesswork on Gault's part.

"He may have gone by some other name?" said the detective.

"Never saw anybody with Hearn but Tom Endicott," replied the woman, without hesitation. "I'm sorry for Tom," added she, regretfully.

"But I suppose it would have come out whether I gave his name or not."

"Anyway, it can't be helped now."

"Though the only man I wanted to punish was Willis Hearn."

"I fancy," said Gault, "that Hearn can be found at the store in which he clerks?"

"If you find him there to-day I'll be the most surprised woman in Moffatsville," the girl answered. "It is more likely you will find him in Brooklyn."

"Is it true about his connections in San Francisco?" questioned Gault, casually. "I mean about his wealthy mine-owning uncle and all that from whom he is to inherit a fortune?"

"It's a lie!"

"Not a word of truth in it!" exclaimed the young woman, vehemently.

"He has no expectations whatever."

"He never was anything but a common blackleg and thief, while a bigger hypocrite never breathed."

"So his great expectations are all a myth?"

"Yes, a pure and unadulterated fabrication."

"I thought so," said Gault, which brought the interview to an end.

CHAPTER XVI.

GOODRICH ENTRUSTED WITH A MISSION TO BROOKLYN.

WHEN Gault entered the tavern where Goodrich was awaiting him he detailed his interview with the mysterious young woman, who, for some inexplicable reason, had refused to give him her name.

We omitted to state this in the preceding chapter, but such was nevertheless the case.

Gault had asked her for her name.

And she had absolutely declined to give it, nor would she say why or for what reason.

"Do you know where the store is where this young man clerks?" Goodrich asked.

"Well, no, not the exact location."

"But I'll soon find that out," Gideon answered.

"But if my mysterious young informant friend is right, he went on, "it is not likely that I'll find him there."

"Does she say that he has taken to flight?"

"No, not quite that."

"But she thinks it's more probable that he'll be found in Brooklyn."

Gault soon located the store kept by Marshall & Pierce.

It was, by long odds the largest general store in the town.

Marshall & Pierce sold everything—we were going to say from a needle to an anchor.

But maybe that would be stretching the truth.

However, the townspeople could buy their drygoods, their groceries, their boots and shoes, their underwear and linen—even their liquors at this same general store—and get them at the same rates as in a much larger city.

There were some thirty clerks employed at this store, and looked very much like an English or Scotch co-operative stop, and was modeled to a certain extent on the same plan.

Gault saw Mr. Pierce, a benign-looking old gentleman, and asked him some few cautious questions about Hearn.

Before that he had ascertained that Willis Hearn had not come to business that day.

Pierce's answers to Gault's questions were as satisfactory as the most fastidious could expect.

Mr. Pierce had nothing but words of praise for his clerk.

He was one of the best young men he had ever had, and was a credit to the establishment.

A grim smile crept into Gault's face at this.

That was because he happened to know better.

The old gentleman was in blissful ignorance of Hearn's true character.

"No doubt but he's a model young man," said the detective.

"But sometimes," he added, with a meaning smile, "model young men are not all they seem."

"What do you mean, sir?" cried Mr. Pierce, flashing up.

He had too good an opinion of his star clerk to hear anything, even by innuendo, said against him.

"Oh, nothing at all," replied Gault, lightly.

"I see Mr. Hearn has not shown up yet to-day."

The old gentleman was instantly mollified.

"That worries me more than I can tell you, sir," he averred.

"I really cannot understand it."

"It's the first time since he has been in our employ to be absent."

"He's a model of punctuality—a model of punctuality, sir," said Mr. Pierce warmly.

"Maybe he is ill?"

"If he was indisposed, sir," said Mr. Pierce with dignity, "he would have dispatched a messenger long ere this."

"No, sir; I'm sorely afraid that something has happened to him."

"Lately, sir, there are so many ruffians, thieves, burglars and what-not, prowling the roads and streets after nightfall that it's as much as a man's life is worth to be out after dark."

Gault intimated that that might be the case, too.

"Was Mr. Hearn a saving young man?"

"Absolutely, sir, absolutely," from the old man with enthusiasm.

"He is one of your principal clerks, is he not?"

"He ranks next to the cashier, sir."

"Then he has a fair salary?"

"Enough to keep him, sir," answered Mr. Pierce stiffly.

"Not only to keep him, sir, but to put away a nice little nest egg."

"Then he's a young man, I'm happy to say, who has great expectations."

"Has he been left a fortune in trust?"

"No, sir; but he will be."

"Besides, he's a member of the church—a member of the church, sir—rating very high indeed in the religious and social scale."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Gault, first having obtained Hearn's address from Pierce.

"Good day, sir."

The detective turned on his heel and was walking out of the store, when the old gentleman called out to him:

"Stop a moment, my good sir—stop a moment!"

"Who shall I tell Mr. Hearn has called?"

"An acquaintance from San Francisco."

Saying which Gault left the great store of Marshall & Pierce.

Gault had not gained any additional information by his contact with Mr. Pierce.

The old gentleman thoroughly believed in the rascal, and he knew that all he could say wouldn't change him.

There was one thing—Gault's interview with Mr. Pierce vastly amused him.

It proved how easily the shrewdest business men are duped by hypocrites.

And if ever man was entitled to be classed in that category, Willis Hearn was the man.

He had been playing a dual part in Moffatsville with eminent success.

The detective now went to Hearn's lodgings.

He entered a narrow, though scrupulously clean, little street at the extreme end of the town.

The houses, of course, were numbered, as in more pretentious towns.

Finding the house—a neat frame building of two stories and basement, newly painted—Gault went up the stoop and rang the door-bell.

The summons was answered by a pretty, matronly-looking woman.

The detective asked for Hearn, and said that he had called at the store to see him on a business matter.

"I don't know what to say, sir," replied the landlady.

"Mr. Hearn has not been home since last evening.

"He went out about nine o'clock and has not returned since.

"I hope nothing has happened to the young gentleman, I'm sure, for a nicer lodger I never had.

"He's the pink of perfection and—goodness," added the good soul.

"Oh, indeed?" said Gault, with an uplifting of his brows.

"Yes, sir—a more model young gentleman never lived."

Then she went on to enumerate Hearn's virtues until Gault stopped her by saying:

"Perhaps I'd better wait in his room till he returns."

"Bless your soul, sir," said the landlady, "you can't do that, for the door of his room is locked and the young gentleman has the key.

"Oh, deary me, I hope nothing has happened to the poor young gentleman!"

And she did really seem to be put out by the rascal's absence.

"He has lived a long time with you, I suppose?" said Gault, neatly turning the subject from Mr. Hearn's absolute good qualities.

"No, not so long, sir—about two months and two days, I should judge.

"It may be a day more, but I'll not be sure."

"Two months, eh?" thought Gault, "and what a time she's making over him.

"He might have been two years, or even ten years, and she could not have known more of his many virtues."

Gault saw the futility of staying any longer, especially as he had no chance of getting into Willis Hearn's room, and so went to meet his friend Goodrich.

"Look here, Silas," said he, "that fellow Hearn is in Brooklyn, and there you are likely to find him.

"I have a good description of him, and an alarm from headquarters will round him up.

"Just a moment while I write his description."

Gault took out his tablets, and his pencil flew over the paper for a couple of minutes.

"This will run him to earth," he said, "if he's in Brooklyn or New York.

"This description comes from two or three persons who know him well."

"Then you want me to set out for Brooklyn at once?" said Goodrich.

"Yes."

"What about the missing head?"

"I'm going to find it."

"Don't trouble yourself about that," said Gault; "by the time you get back to Moffatsville I'll have it found."

"You appear to look on it as a sure thing?"

"I do. There is something in my blood that tells me that I shall find the missing head of the poor old miser within twenty-four hours."

"I'm sure I hope you will."

"But it will be a hard task, I'm afraid."

And Silas Goodrich shook his head dubiously.

"Never mind, my boy," replied Gideon, with a smile of hope on his face, "you leave at once for Brooklyn and let me work this end of the case."

"You may believe that it will pan out good before you come back."

"Now I leave you to round up Willis Hearn, while I attend to Bill Beatty and Moffatsville."

"Where do you leave Tom Endicott?" asked Silas.

"Doesn't he come into your calculations?"

"I have a theory about Endicott which may prove right or wrong, and which I am forced for the present to leave to the future."

CHAPTER XVII.

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF THE MISER'S BODY.

THERE was an astounding surprise in store for Gideon Gault when he got back to the miser's house.

He found the front door locked, and to his repeated summonses there came no answer.

"The marshal and his side-partner surely have not fallen asleep," said the detective.

Then he hammered at the door with the butt of one of Goodrich's revolvers—for he still retained possession of those weapons and had reloaded them.

But he knocked in vain.

There was still no response.

"This looks queer," thought he.

"What can have become of the men?

"They're not in the house, that's certain!"

Nor were they, as he soon found out.

The detective did not care to force the door, which he might easily have done, so he went round to the rear of the old structure, only to find that the door there was locked, too.

All sorts of thoughts occurred to Gault now.

Had the two men quitted their post and locked the doors of the old building?

This seemed hardly likely.

The marshal, the detective had been told, was a stickler to duty; and, as he had been left there with strict instructions not to leave the house until the return of the magistrate, it was not probable that he would disobey the orders given.

In fact, had he done so, it would cost him his position as the regular police officer of Moffatsville.

Gault reflected.

Then he thought of Bill Beatty and his gang.

What if Beatty had returned with a strong body of his men, forced an entrance to the house and overpowered the marshal and his companion?

This probably was the true gist of the matter.

Then Gault went round to the front, reflecting the while what he had better do.

Near the window of the room where he had found the receipt given by Hearn to the miser, he found that the previous impressions, which he had measured at the time, had been trampled out, in a word, wholly obliterated by dozens of other imprints all jumbled together.

A smile crossed the detective's massive features.

"I am glad I noted those imprints," was his mental communing.

"The fools are late, for I have the measurements."

Now it occurred to him that by entering the house he might be running into some trap set by Beatty and his followers.

But he would take chances on that, he concluded.

He must get in by some means—by one of the windows, if no other point of ingress offered.

No sooner did the detective form this resolution than he acted on it.

He went up to the window and forced the lower sash, as Bill Beatty had done the night before.

In a second Gault was in the room.

Nothing had been touched in that apartment so far as he could then see.

The papers still littered the floor.

The brass-bound box was on the table, open.

The old-fashioned brass lamp was in its place still.

Indeed everything about the place looked as it had done previously—that is, nothing had been disturbed, not even a small spirit flask which had been left by Willis Hearn, on the night of the murder.

"Now to take a run through the house," resolved Gault, "and discover any signs of a struggle—if such has taken place.

"What a weird stillness there's about the old building!

"It seems as if it was given over to the dead!"

The detective did not neglect to use every precaution that was necessary.

He examined his weapons before making the rounds of the house—and he was determined not to run into a trap, if care and prudence would prevent it.

With cocked revolver in hand Gault made his way to the room where the miser's mutilated trunk lay—the room in which the coroner and his jury had held their investigation and pronounced their verdict.

Here signs of a struggle were plainly visible.

Two chairs and a table were upset—one of the chairs broken into fragments.

Everything else was in disorder, proving that a desperate fight had taken place there.

Then there were some recent splotches of blood on the floor.

And the leg of one of the chairs—the broken one, which had, no doubt, been used as a weapon—was red with gore.

Beyond a doubt a terrific struggle had occurred in that room; and, with as little doubt, the victims were the marshal and his associate.

"Nice state of things," cogitated Gault.

"But where's the body of Moffat?"

He searched in vain.

It was gone!

Gault went through every room in the house, even to the cellars and attics, with the same result.

He could find no explanation of the mystery.

The marshal and his aid had vanished as effectually as a puff of smoke on the morning air, leaving no trace as to how they had gone save in the upsetting of an old table and the breaking of a chair.

The mutilated remains of Andrew Moffat had disappeared similarly.

Where?

"It's no use staying here," thought the detective.

"I had better hunt about and get on those fellows' track."

He left the house as he had entered it, and, bending over once more, he saw the imprints of many footsteps in the still soft loam near the road.

He traced these impressions down the road to a considerable distance.

It was in a direction, though, opposite to the town of Moffatsville, and ended with the deeper impressions of the narrow tires of wagon wheels—something resembling the same vehicle which he had traced into the lane, and which his experience told him was a wagonette.

While Gault was examining those impressions and endeavoring to draw whatever conclusions he could from them, the yelping of a dog rung suddenly on his ear.

Glancing back in the direction whence he had come, he saw a countrified-looking young fellow approaching.

A powerfully-built man of probably about twenty years or so.

Running and barking alongside was a splendid specimen of a fox terrier.

The detective waited till the twain came up.

"Good day, sir," saluted the farmer-looking man, cheerily.

"I saw you looking on the ground."

"Lost anything?"

Gault scanned the young fellow for a moment, and was rather pleased with his appearance.

"Yes," he replied, grinning.

"I've lost a trail."

"A what?" cried the farmer-looking man, as though he did not quite comprehend.

"A trail."

"And what might that be?" a puzzled look in his eyes.

"A trail."

"A trail! Confound me, but I'm just as wise as before."

"A trail of what?"

"Of footsteps."

"Oho! That's it!"

"Well, I hope you'll get your trail, mister—but I must be jogging on."

The fox-terrier started in to bark for all he was worth—then made a dash for the roadside hedge, disappearing in a trice.

"What's the matter with your dog?" asked Gault.

"Has he rabies?"

"Nary a raby," the young fellow laughingly rejoined.

"Though he does seem off his base, sure enough."

"Is he often that way?"

"No, I'll take my oath he's not; but ever since he's passed old Andrew's house the very d—l seems to have taken possession of him."

"That's strange," said the detective.

"But who, pray, is old Andrew?"

"Andrew Moffat, the miser, to be sure!"

"It's easy to see you're a stranger, or you'd have known all about it," the young man added, regarding Gault in turn with a glance suggestive of distrust.

"There was a murder done here last night," he went on, "and there's the deuce to pay all round."

"Hum, who was murdered?" from Gault, carelessly.

"Why, Andrew Moffat, the wealthy old miser," replied the country lad.

As he said this he opened his eyes like saucers, and

looked at Gault, as one would at some strange animal, which one might have seen for the first time.

"You're a queer one," his looks seemed to say, "not to know Andrew Moffat!"

"Where have you come from, anyhow?"

At this juncture the fox-terrier set up a terrific howling.

"There goes that dog of yours again! What's the matter with him now?"

The detective had evolved a strange theory in his mind.

"The deuce of me knows! Mebbe he has seen poor old Andrew's ghost!"

"They say dogs can see more'n a human bein'—and, natural enough, too, seeing that some of their senses are keener than man's."

Gault had now approached the rent in the hedge, and forced his way through into the adjoining field, which, as it happened, was a field of corn.

The countryman, nothing loath, followed.

There was the fox-terrier, scratching away for dear life into the sodden soil with his claws, and occasionally sniffing with his nose and barking furiously.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DISCOVERY.

"WELL, I declare," cried the countryman; "that dog has the sense of a human critter, he has."

"He knows there's something buried there, and he's scratching—scratching away, as though he'd like to dig it up."

Gault saw that the earth had been recently disturbed—dug up—then hurriedly stamped down.

Now for his theory—the thought that took possession of him, so to speak.

What had been buried there that the fox terrier, noted for its keen scent, should carry on as if beside himself?

The detective thought of the old miser's head!

Was he actually on the verge of a discovery?

He had no doubt about it now.

The mutilated trunk was not buried there, that was plain, ■ the space which the loose earth covered was not large enough. The excavation which doubtless had been made in the loam was not of that extent as to conceal the miser's body.

Therefore, if hiding any of the remains, it must be the missing head, and nothing but that.

"Say, my man," began Gault, at last, "you appear to be a manly, level-headed chap."

"Now I shall confide to you the fact that I'm a detective, and that I am here to bring the murderers of Andrew Moffat to justice."

"You understand what I mean?"

"Sure!"

"And so you are a detective?"—in open-eyed surprise.

"Yes, that is right," replied Gault, who rather enjoyed the young fellow's amazement.

"My name's Gault."

"I'm from Brooklyn."

"By gum! I thought you were summat o' that sort," said the country lad.

"I've heard of you often, mister."

"Shake!"

Gault smilingly extended his hand, which the other grasped fervidly, saying:

"Now, Mr. Gault, what do you want me to do?"

"First, to keep your mouth shut, and say nothing of what I may tell you or whatever you may see."

"Very good."

"Is that all?"

"No. I want you to get me a spade, if possible."

"There's one in the next field; I'll get it."

"Thanks!"

"I hope we'll know each other better before I leave," said Gault.

"Go get the shovel."

"Do you expect to find anything there where the dog's scratched?"

"Yes."

"Money?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"Hurry off for that spade, and you'll see when you get back."

"Take the dog with you."

"That is, see if you can get him to go."

"All right."

The young fellow ran through the field about twenty yards, called the fox-terrier by name, and repeatedly whistled for him.

But not a move from Slaney—for this was the dog's name.

He kept barking right on, and digging with his claws as before.

"Confound the critter!"

"He won't come," said the young man disappointedly.

"That's all right."

"Go without him."

"He's more interested in digging the loam up at present than following you."

"Yes; and he knows there's a prize beneath it, too," said the farmer.

"A gory one," declared Gault.

"Hasten back; will you, please?"

Without more ado the young man went into the next field, and presently returned with a shovel.

"Here you are!" he said, handing Gault the implement.

"Or maybe I had better do the digging, seeing as I'm better used to it than you."

"Drive your dog away, and I'll do what's to be done," said Gault.

The young fellow had to clout the dog hard before he could get him to leave the spot.

In this, however, he finally succeeded; but he had to hold him while the detective dug into the soft ground.

It did not take Gault more than ten minutes—perhaps less—to shovel out the mold, when his spade struck something that sent a shiver through his veins.

He paused for a moment in his work.

"Got it, sir?" inquired the farmer, with great interest.

"Got what?"

"What you were looking for."

"Oh, yes."

"Guess it's all right now."

Gault had already cleared the loose earth away from the object, which proved to be something done up in a strip of ill-smelling canvas.

"I fancy I've found what I'm after," he added as he took hold of the canvas and hauled it out of the hole which he had dug.

"It doesn't seem to be much of a find," observed the farmer, disappointedly.

"No, that's true enough," replied Gault.

"You aren't afraid of having your nerves shocked, are you?"

"No; guess not."

"What's in that old dirty piece of cloth to shock anybody's nerves?"

"Poor Andrew Moffat's head," replied Gault, solemnly, and with a quick movement he exposed the gory object in all its ghastliness.

"Ugh!" shuddered the young farmer. "I've had enough of that."

"Please cover it up."

"It's not a nice sight to see, is it?"

"God forbid that I should see such again," said the young man, fervently.

"It's small wonder that poor Slaney barked and howled."

"What are you going to do with it?"—with a shudder from the farmer.

"Hold it as evidence."

"Now I must get the body."

"Is that missing too?"

"Yes, and so are the men who were left to guard it."

"Who were they?"

"The town marshal and a farmer detailed for the duty by Mr. Herold."

"Now look here," said the young farmer, "you're not going to lug that horrible thing about with you?"

"Supposin' I put it away till you want it?"

"Where?"

"I know a place where it will be quite safe till you require it—that is, until you find the body."

The detective was not sorry to get rid of his ghastly find, and led by his new-found acquaintance he got once more into the road, the fox terrier following with all the life apparently sapped out of his body.

He barked no longer, but seemed to regard the canvas parcel with awe, if not with positive dread.

Down the road they went for about a quarter of a mile.

They turned into a lane resembling the one in which Goodrich had been attacked the night before.

"There's an old house a little way down here," said the young man, whose name was Simon Fraser.

"It is on my father's land, and has been unoccupied for years."

"I fancy it's about the safest place you can stow your find till you need it."

Gault presently discovered that the country lad was much better educated than he had pretended to be, and further that he was quite a bright, intelligent fellow.

The detective reflected for a moment about the offer, and finally accepted it.

He did not relish carrying his ghastly burden around with him, and when they had got to the old house, which stood some yards out of the lane, and which was really little better than a cabin, the young farmer took the grisly bundle from him and disposed it in a safe place, where the detective could find it when he wanted it.

"Now for the other remains of the poor old fellow," said Gault, as they got once more into the road.

"Where do you expect to find them?"

Gault thought for a moment.

"There is a lake hereabouts," he asked, "isn't there?"

He had been anxiously looking at the impressions in the road made by the narrow tires of the vehicle, which he had traced for some distance from where the footprints terminated.

It occurred to him before that the marshal and his companion, being suddenly pounced upon and overpowered, had been borne to this vehicle, as well as the gory trunk of Andrew Moffat—and that, by tracing those impressions, he would doubtless find where they had been taken to.

He knew also that there was a small lake of stagnant water at no great distance.

"Yes, there is a sort of pond," replied the farmer—"about half a mile from here."

"But what do you expect to find there?"

"It is possible the murderers have sunk the body in the lake," averred Gault.

Just then their attention was attracted to the veiled figure of a woman coming toward them.

The detective recognized the figure instantly.

It was the mysterious young woman who had given him the information about Willis Hearn.

What could have brought her wandering about there?

The woman, the instant she saw Gault and the farmer, quickened her pace.

They did not wait for her to come up, however, but went forward to meet her.

"Mr. Gault, I'm so glad you've come," she said, with suppressed emotion in her voice.

Then she looked at Fraser and hesitated.

"This gentleman's all right," assured the detective.

"But why are you glad to see me now?"

Gault, it must be admitted, was a little curious.

"First, answer me one thing," she went on.

"Well?"

"Did you see Hearn yet?"

"No."

"Did you call at the store?"

"Yes."

"And didn't find him?"

"No; I did not."

"Then, you visited his lodgings?"

"Yes; I called at No.—H—Street," he answered, deliberately.

"He wasn't there?"

The girl's eyes fairly blazed with eagerness as the words left her lips.

This could be easily seen through her thin veil.

"No, he didn't return from the night before," replied the detective, puzzled by her questions.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she cried, raising her voice to a higher pitch.

"It was too much to expect—the crafty fox that he is!"

CHAPTER XIX.

GAULT ON MR. BEATTY'S LITTLE GAME.

"PARDON me, madam," said Gault, addressing the mysterious young woman, "I can't say that I view it in that light."

"To tell the truth I don't see very much craft in Hearn's action—"

"You don't know him as I do," cried the girl with the blazing eyes; "Willis Hearn has the cunning and venom of a serpent."

"But for all his cunning he shall be trapped, and die the death of the villain that he is."

"Have you nothing more than that to say?" interjected Gault coldly.

He thought the woman was carrying her spleen too far—and as he had other and more vital matters to attend to, he didn't care to be detained by her.

"No, no, Mr. Gault," she cried, "I have good news for you."

"Did you call at the Moffat house on your way here?"

"Yes."

"And you made a discovery?" eagerly.

"I did, indeed."

"But what do your questions tend to?" asked the detective cunningly.

He did not for an instant imagine she could furnish him any clew to the disappearance of the marshal and his associate—also the disappearance of the miser's remains.

But he soon found that was exactly what she could do.

"I can tell you where they have the two men," she began.

"What men?"

"The men left to guard the body of poor old Moffat," she replied tensely—"the men left by Mr. Herold and the coroner to look after the house in their absence."

"Thank you."

"That's just what I want to find out," said Gault, rubbing his hands and looking at the woman with a pleased expression for the first time.

"You discovered that they were attacked in the house?" she went on.

"Yes, I did make that discovery," replied Gault, "and it's been puzzling me ever since where they've been taken to."

"But how came you to know about it?"

"Were you present?"

The woman emitted a meaning chuckle which she tried to suppress.

"No," was her reply, when she had mastered herself.

"You were near the house, of course?"

"Not that even."

"Then you didn't see them taking the men away?"

"No."

"Then I should like to know what you really do know about the matter," said Gault, disappointedly.

"Listen; I will tell you."

And the woman went on coolly to detail her story.

It appeared from her account that while wandering about one of the country lanes she heard the tramp of horses' feet.

This was followed by the rumble of an approaching vehicle.

The vehicle, she knew, was being driven furiously.

Not caring to be seen, and wishing to find out the cause of all the rumpus and the excitement, she darted in among a clump of bushes near by, and waited for the vehicle and horsemen to come up.

She saw in a turn of the lane a wagonette (Gault was not far wrong in his surmises) surrounded by half a dozen horsemen.

They drove up within a dozen yards of the clump of bushes, and there stopped.

The leader of the party was a tall, powerful man, from whose description, as given by the woman, Gault recognized Bill Beatty.

They stayed for a few minutes in the lane talking.

"What about?" interrupted Gault, at this point of the woman's narrative.

"I am coming to that," replied the girl.

"They alluded to a house away off the lane, in the heart of a little piece of pine woods—saying that the house, being deserted, and supposed to be haunted, consequently would be the safest place they could convey their prisoners to—as well as the miser's body."

"Some objected, and mentioned another house by the seaside, where the marshal and farmer would be safer—being more under their immediate care."

"You see they were referring to the two men who had been left to guard the miser's house in the absence of the higher authorities."

"It appeared that these men, though come upon suddenly, had given the scoundrels who attacked them a terrific fight, before they were overpowered."

"At last the discussion ended, by the tall, muscular man declaring that they should be taken where he wanted them—so the two men, gagged and bound, were finally lifted out of the wagon, where they had been covered over with straw and canvas, and borne in the direction of the wood—to which the tall man (Beatty) had so vehemently alluded in the discussion."

"Well, what followed?" asked Gault.

"After the bound and gagged men were carried into the wood by the driver of the wagon and the men who had dismounted, they returned for the trunk of the murdered man, which it appeared they had tied up in an old gunny bag."

"Then having accomplished this they came back."

"I'll tell you what it is, my lads," said Beatty.

"We'll leave these two customers in the old house till to-morrow night, then when I've formed my plans where to take them, we'll return for them and the miser's body."

"Why not burn the body?" suggested one of the men.

"I was thinking of that," replied Beatty.

"It would be a very good plan; and get rid of the head, too, along with it."

"We don't want any such evidence hanging over us," he added.

"Even if they should happen to round some of us up, and they not find the old chap's remains, they can do nothing."

"This seemed to sound very plausible, and they all laughed."

"One fellow asked what had become of Willis Hearn, and Beatty replied that he was either in Brooklyn or New York, and that it was not likely that he would ever show his face in Moffatsville again."

"They can prove nothing against him," he said; "but he's too fly a fellow to give 'em a chance."

"He'll get out of the country by the first mail steamship that sails."

"Yes, it'll be just as well for him," observed one of the other men; "for, if ever Tom Endicott gets all right, he'll fill him full of lead."

"It was a shabby trick to play on a pal—to go back on him and come nigh murdering him that way."

"Well, that's none of our business," said Beatty.

"Let 'em settle that between them, if they ever should run across each other."

"We've got most of the boddle, anyway, and that's all we care about."

"Are you going to leave those fellows alone in the house?" asked the driver, speaking up.

"By Jove! you just remind me," answered Beatty.

"No; a couple of the boys must be left behind to guard 'em, lest they escape before we get back."

"And so it was arranged," pursued the woman.

"Two powerful, rough-looking fellows returned to the wood, while the others galloped off, with the wagonette bringing up the rear."

"Anything further?" interrogated the detective.

"Yes," the girl rejoined.

"When Beatty and his men went away and were out of hearing I emerged from my hiding place and entered the wood."

"I had to act with great caution, and did, being careful of every step I took."

"I finally found where the house was in the timber, and being convinced that there would be no further move made by Beatty and his gang till next day, I started for Moffatsville, and as luck would have it met you on the way."

"Now what do you intend to do?" she inquired.

"Will you return to your hotel and let me attend to the rest?" said Gault.

"Without me you won't be able to find the house," she replied.

"Oh, yes, we will," returned the young farmer.

"I know the pine wood very well."

"The house at one time belonged to a man named Casey, who died there under the most mysterious circumstances."

"I was only a small boy at the time, but I can recall the occurrence distinctly."

"It is called Casey's haunted house, and it is about the safest place they could have chosen in these parts, for nobody will go near it."

"Now what do you think we should do?" went on the young farmer, turning to Gault.

"We want to make sure of this thing," said the detective, ruminating.

"Yes, sure," replied the farmer.

"We shall require a conveyance and—help," he added.

So it was arranged that the young lady should return to her hotel, and there await the development of events.

The girl was about turning away when she said quickly to Gault:

"What have you done toward the arrest of Willis Hearn?"

"He is in good hands," replied Gault, smiling.

"By this time there is a hue and cry in every large city in the East for him.
 "He cannot escape; you may rest easy on that point."
 "Was that gentleman who was with you a detective?"
 She alluded to Goodrich.
 "Yes, one of the cleverest officers on Long Island.
 "He'll take care of Willis Hearn, rest assured."

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTURE AT CASEY'S HAUNTED HOUSE—AND CONCLUSION.

GAULT's conjecture that Tom Endicott had been foully dealt with was made plain now—by the story of the girl in the preceding chapter.

One thing appeared certain—Beatty had no hand in Hearn's attack on the crook, for had he, some allusion would surely have been made in the colloquy between Beatty and his men in the lane.

When the detective and Fraser got back to Moffatsville they sought Mr. Herold.

The latter had been having a heated debate with the townspeople as to the reward that should be offered for the arrest of old Moffat's murderers.

The principal citizens of Moffatsville were willing to give five hundred dollars.

"Not enough!" said the justice decisively.

"We shall want at least a thousand."

And from that he wouldn't abate one jot.

Finally they let him have his way in the matter, and the reward for the apprehension of the assassins was put down at that figure.

"You see I held out like a Titan," said Mr. Herold proudly, "and if I didn't it would have stood at five hundred."

"The laborer is worthy of his hire—eh, Mr. Gault?" said he, laughing.

"But what about this story of yours?"

The detective briefly told him.

"And does this young man"—turning to the farmer—"know the exact location of the house where the marshal and his friend are incarcerated?"

"He can answer for himself," Gault quietly replied.

"I know it as well as I know my own brother's," the young man rejoined.

"But it has the reputation of being haunted, and nobody will go near it, not even in daylight."

"That's all fudge," said the magistrate.

"There's no such thing as a haunted house, and these rascals know it."

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Gault?"

"I want you to let me have a conveyance and a posse."

"When do you want them?"

"At dusk."

"It is better not to go there in daylight," Gault added.

"I quite agree with you."

"Where are you stopping?"

"Nowhere as yet," replied Gault.

"But, while you are getting your arrangements perfected, I'll just turn into Johnson's tavern, and Mr. Fraser will go with me, if he doesn't mind."

"I want to see this thing out," said Fraser.

"I'll leave Slaney with a friend and join you, Mr. Gault, at Johnson's."

And so it was arranged.

Gault, on parting with Mr. Herold, went to Johnson's and ordered a good, substantial meal for himself and the young farmer, who, having got rid of the dog, came in later.

When darkness had set in, Mr. Herold called at Johnson's, and was soon closeted with Gault and Fraser.

"I've made all the necessary arrangements," he explained, rubbing his hands satisfactorily.

"We'll give the rascals a surprise that they little dream of."

"I think you acted wisely, Mr. Gault, in not taking the responsibility on yourself."

"How so?" asked Gault.

"It occurred to me that Beatty might return with his men, and however gritty two are, they can't tackle a dozen, you know."

"That is very true," said Gault, reflectively.

"But what arrangements have you made?"

"Got together enough men to scoop every rascal of 'em in," replied the little judge, jubilantly.

"They're not fools, either, you can rest assured on that."

"How many men?"—laconically.

"Eight, and every man of 'em armed with a Winchester and a revolver—and, what's better, they know how to use them, too."

"Some of the boys have been out on the plains; the rest are old soldiers."

"If Mr. Beatty gets away with them, I'll go to Brooklyn and start a junk shop."

And Mr. Herold laughed heartily.

"What about the conveyance?" questioned Gault.

"Is it a wagon?"

"Not a bit of it, sir—two roomy close carriages—the old-fashioned sort, where half a dozen men can sit comfortably."

"Reckon that'll fit the bill?"

"Yes; and many thanks for all the trouble you have taken on my account," said Gault.

"I should like to go with you in this expedition," said Herold. "Say," he went on—"I forgot one thing, though—there's a young lady downstairs who wants to see you."

As these words left the magistrate's lips, he wasn't looking at any one in particular, so Fraser took it as meaning himself.

"A lady to see me, Mr. Herold?" asked he.

"No, young gentleman; certainly not," replied the judge.

"Then it must be me," smiled the detective, who once more had the mysterious young woman in mind.

"Yes, to see you, Mr. Gault."

"I think I know the lady," interjected Gault.

"I guess I'd better see her, though I requested her to wait at her hotel."

"Where is she?"

"In the common room."

"Then, gentlemen, you must excuse me for a few minutes," said the detective.

He arose to go.

"No hurry at all, Mr. Gault," said Herold.

"Is there a cigar anywhere about the place?"

"Yes," answered the farmer, "Johnson brought a box of 'em up here, and forgot to take 'em away again. 'Help yourself.'

"That's nice; helping myself to other people's property," laughed the magistrate.

But he took a cigar from the box all the same.

And Fraser, not to be behind, took another, and as Gault left the room they were puffing away like steam engines.

Gideon went downstairs and found the mysterious lady awaiting him.

"Well," he said rather brusquely, "I didn't expect to see you here. Why didn't you stay at your hotel till I came there?"

"Because I've made a discovery, good Mister Detective," saucily from the girl.

"What! Another?" echoed Gault.

"Yes."

"What is its nature?"

"I've found the location of this rendezvous of Beatty's, near the seaside."

"You?"

And Gault gaped with astonishment.

"Well, not exactly me," explained the woman, "but a little gypsy boy whom I employ."

"I've been attending to this case, Mr. Gault, far more than you think."

"Yes, my sprite—my gypsy boy—has discovered this outlaws' rendezvous—by the purest accident."

"That's why I left my hotel to come here—so you perceive, I am not such a numbskull as you may seem to think."

"Oh, madam! How can you say such a thing? I never thought anything of the kind!" expostulated Gault, with uplifted hands and eyes.

"Never mind. This is a bit of play-acting; I know it," laughed the girl.

"But that is neither here nor there."

"When you've scooped in those fellows at Casey's—why, you can just go on ahead, and corral the big devil, Bill Beatty, and the rest of his gang."

As she spoke a boy entered the common room.

He was a telegraph messenger, there being a branch office of the Western Union in the town besides that of another company.

"Can you please tell me where I can find Mr. Gault?" he asked, glancing up at the detective, who stood more than head and shoulders above him.

"I am Mr. Gault, my lad. What's that you have?" asked Gault.

"Dispatch, I believe, from Brooklyn, sir." The detective took the envelope and tore it open. The words of the telegram ran as follows:

"Willis Hearn arrested. About to take a steamer for Galveston. GOODRICH."

"What do you think of that, madam?" said Gault, as he passed the woman the dispatch.

She read the words, shook in every limb and turned as white as paper.

"At last—at last!" she gasped, and fell right off in a dead faint.

The news had been too much for her overwrought nerves.

Gault had no time to waste on her now, however, and calling the landlady of the inn, he confided the girl to her charge, requesting her to send at once for the nearest physician.

He also left instructions that on his return he would see the patient and follow out any suggestion she might make.

"Keep the lady here at all hazards," said he to Mrs. Johnson, "and please see that every consideration is shown to her."

With that he went back to Herold and Fraser.

He partly told them what the strange woman had come to the inn for, as well as the dispatch he had received as to the arrest of Willis Hearn.

"Do you think he is really guilty of the murder, Mr. Gault?" ventured the magistrate.

"Yes, without the least doubt."

"But this Bill Beatty is as deep in the mire as Hearn is in the mud."

"Of the two rascals, however, commend me to Beatty, who professes to be nothing but what he is."

"The other is a rank hypocrite—a man more than all others to be feared."

The little judge said nothing.

And Fraser, having no acquaintance with Hearn, also held his tongue.

"Now, gentlemen," said Gault, "isn't it time to be jogging along?"

"If you are ready I am."

"I'd really and truly like to go with you," said Mr. Herold.

"No, thank you, not on this trip," returned Gault, laughing.

"We'll give you the post of honor, if you desire it, on the next journey—when we do our big, most important work."

"You mean the apprehension of Mr. William Beatty and the rest of his cut-throats?"

"That's precisely what I mean, Mr. Herold."

"Now, sir, where are those close carriages of yours?"

"I'll have them here within ten minutes."

"And the posse, too?"

"Yes," replied the judge.

"They will be ensconced in the carriages."

"Very good plan," said Fraser.

"I hope it doesn't miscarry, though."

"No fear of that," said Herold, and off he went to get the conveyances.

Within the stipulated time the magistrate had returned.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "the coaches are at the door, and everything in order and shipshape."

Down the stairs they went and out into the street.

It was not quite so dark as the night before.

But it was dark enough.

One advantage of the evening was the fact that there was no storm impending.

A refreshing breeze blew from the sea both pleasant and exhilarating.

"Everything is propitious," murmured Gault to himself.

"The very night air is with us."

"All augurs of success."

"I'll mount the box with the driver of the first coach," said the young farmer, "and knowing the way so well I guess I had better take the lines."

No objection being offered, Fraser sprang into the driver's seat and relieved the man of the reins.

Gault sprang into the first carriage.

Then the vehicles rolled away, and five minutes later had left the town of Moffatville behind.

Poor Andrew Moffat's house was passed in silence, not a word being spoken by the armed men in the coaches.

How grim and cold the old structure looked!

Not a light or a sign of life!

It was but too truly a house of death!

The lane was at last reached, which led to Casey's haunted house.

The signal was given to stop, and the armed posse got out of the carriages.

Fraser handed his lines to the driver, and sprang into the road.

"I guess," said the young man, "that we had better go the rest of the way on foot."

"The carriages can follow some distance in the rear, and drive up when they get the signal."

Having settled upon a signal the armed posse, led by Gault and Fraser, stole silently and swiftly through the darkness like so many shadows.

They at last drew up before the pine wood and, after a brief breathing-spell, entered its gloomy precincts by a path known to the young farmer.

Five minutes later they surrounded the old house—a most forlorn and weird-looking structure in the very heart of the little forest.

There was a single light burning in one of the shattered windows at the back of the house; and while Fraser was directing Gault's attention to it, a rude door opened and two men came out.

Not suspecting the reception they were to meet, they walked unconsciously into the arms of those awaiting them.

They were quickly overpowered and disarmed.

"Now, look you here, my good fellow," said Gault, pressing the cold muzzle of a revolver against one fellow's cheek, "make a sound above your breath, and I'll scatter whatever brains you have!"

The man was in an awful funk, and his legs shook together with fear.

"Now, answer me!" pursued the detective sternly.

"Where have you the two men whom you attacked at Andrew Moffat's, and subsequently kidnaped?"

"But, better still, lead us to where you have them imprisoned."

"And, mind, if you make a treacherous move or utter a word, it will be your last; for a bullet will find its way to your heart—provided you have such a thing."

The other rascal was likewise threatened with instant death if he gave vent to a sound to alarm any of his comrades who might be in the house.

"There is no one but us two," intimated the fellow in a hoarse whisper.

"So much the better for you," said the man who held him.

"That fact will no doubt be the means of saving your bacon."

"Just get a move on you and come along."

In this way the two rascals were marched into the "haunted" house.

The light was brought by one of the posse from the room where it was burning, and Gault said to the fellow he held:

"Now lead the way to where you have your prisoners—and see you make no mistake, or I'll blow you into smithereens!"

Then, preceded by Fraser, who held the light, the party was led to the second floor of the crumbling structure and down a corridor.

At the end of the corridor was a room with a ponderous door, which was padlocked and bolted.

"You will find them in there," said the fellow whom Gault held.

"Unlock that padlock—and be quick about it," ordered the detective.

The man whose collar Gault grasped fumbled in his coat-pocket for some keys, produced one, and instantly unlocked the padlock.

The bolts were then shot back, and the party passed into a foul-smelling room.

This apartment had not as much as a window.

The air of the place was villainous, so the door was thrown wide open to let in what pure air there might be.

Here they discovered the marshal and his aid bound hand and foot.

They were stretched on the bare floor of the chamber, almost suffocated from the poisonous gases which they inhaled, and which, while the door was closed, could find no egress from the place.

Though not gagged they were unable to utter a word for some time.

They were otherwise all right, save for a slight scalp-wound the marshal had got in his struggle with Bill Beatty and his rascally gang.

Their limbs were soon freed, however—and a few mouthfuls of brandy revived them so they could stand on their feet.

In the same room was found the gunny sack, containing the gory trunk of poor old Moffat.

About nine o'clock that night, Gault and his posse, with the marshal and his associate, as well as the murdered man's body, and the two prisoners, re-entered the town of Moffatsville, and were met by Mr. Herold and the leading citizens.

The outlaws, after being questioned, and refusing to give any information, were conveyed to the lockup and there left under a strong guard.

"Now," observed the little magistrate, "now will come the final catastrophe of the drama.

"Where is your mysterious young lady, Mr. Gault? I guess you'd better hurry her up; the lads are still waiting downstairs, and have been joined by six more, as we mean to make a clean scoop of it."

"It won't take me long to find her, I believe," said Gault.

Nor did it.

She was still in the tavern, and had completely recovered.

With her, too, was the gypsy boy whom she had alluded to.

"He will convey you to the place, Mr. Gault," said the girl.

"It is not at all necessary," Fraser interrupted.

"I know every acre of the country hereabouts for twenty miles—and he has only to describe the place, and I'll find it."

"As to that you may please yourself," replied the woman, with an indifference that rather surprised Gault. "In the arrest of Willis Hearn my life work is accomplished, and if his conviction follows as easily as his capture I'll be the happiest woman in these United States—for then my poor sister's betrayal and death will be avenged."

This revengeful and vindictive feeling was even too much for the detective—and he finally turned away from her in disgust.

Fraser took the gypsy lad aside, and after some questioning got the exact location of Beatty's rendezvous.

"I know it well," he explained to Gault a few minutes later.

"It was once owned by a Southern gentleman and called Garrison Hall.

"I could go there with my eyes closed—for many a day's shooting I've had about the old place."

"Well," said Mr. Herold, when Gault and Fraser had rejoined him, "have you got all the information necessary?"

"Yes. Are the men ready?"

"They are waiting outside—and the coaches, too," replied Herold.

"We'll not want coaches this trip," said Fraser.

"They'll only be in the way, anyhow."

"I know a route by which we can cut off two miles—and less than an hour and a half's walk will take us there."

"A little too much of a trudge for me," said the magistrate, shaking his head.

"Guess you'll have to go it alone this journey."

"I never was a good pedestrian, anyhow; in fact I never was cut out for one."

With the strong-armed force placed at his disposal, Gault, guided by Fraser, made the distance in a little less than an hour and thirty minutes.

Like Indians, on a scouting expedition, the armed posse entered the forest, and, without creating alarm, surrounded Garrison Hall.

The victory was a bloodless one.

There were only four outlaws in the old house and they were easily overpowered without a shot being fired.

Bill Beatty, some two hours earlier, had gone to Brooklyn, as did the major portion of his band—and so for the time saved themselves from arrest.

The old Hall was searched from top to bottom for Endicott, but Gault subsequently discovered that he had been conveyed to one of the Brooklyn hospitals earlier in the day, where he breathed his last twenty-four hours later, as the injuries inflicted on him by Willis Hearn were of a fatal character.

Next morning the six prisoners were removed to Brooklyn under the escort of Gault and a strong posse of citizens, and finally incarcerated in Raymond Street Jail, from which they were taken within three weeks, tried, convicted and sentenced to Sing Sing for various terms not exceeding ten years.

Twenty hours after the arrest of Willis Hearn, Bill Beatty shared a like fate.

Gault rounded him up where he was in hiding—in a low dive on Columbia Street, Brooklyn.

In due time both he and Hearn were brought to trial.

They were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment at Auburn.

They are still there, and likely to remain, till death sets in to claim them.

They are said to have had the narrowest escape on record from suffering the extreme penalty.

The miser's wealth had as mysteriously vanished as a puff of smoke.

Nothing could be gleaned from the prisoners, and nothing was ever found of it.

Gault never saw his mysterious informant after that night—nor did he make any searching inquiries about her, nor was Nellie Remsen ever heard of afterward.

Poor old Andrew Moffat's remains were gathered together and decently buried, while Gault and Goodrich received the thousand dollars reward voted by the good citizens of Moffatsville for the arrest of Moffat's assassins.

[THE END.]

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